



THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!!

13

STORY ■
SHIROW
SHIRATORI

ART ■
SHIRABII

SUPERVISION
■ SAIYUKI

VISIT...

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THIS TRIP
IS TO SAY
GOODBYE.

THIS HARUKA
TRAIN'S LAST
STOP
IS KANSAI
INTERNATIONAL
AIRPORT.

FROM THERE
SHE'LL GET ON A
PLANE AND MIO
.....

MIO WILL GO
OVERSEAS ALL BY
HERSELF.

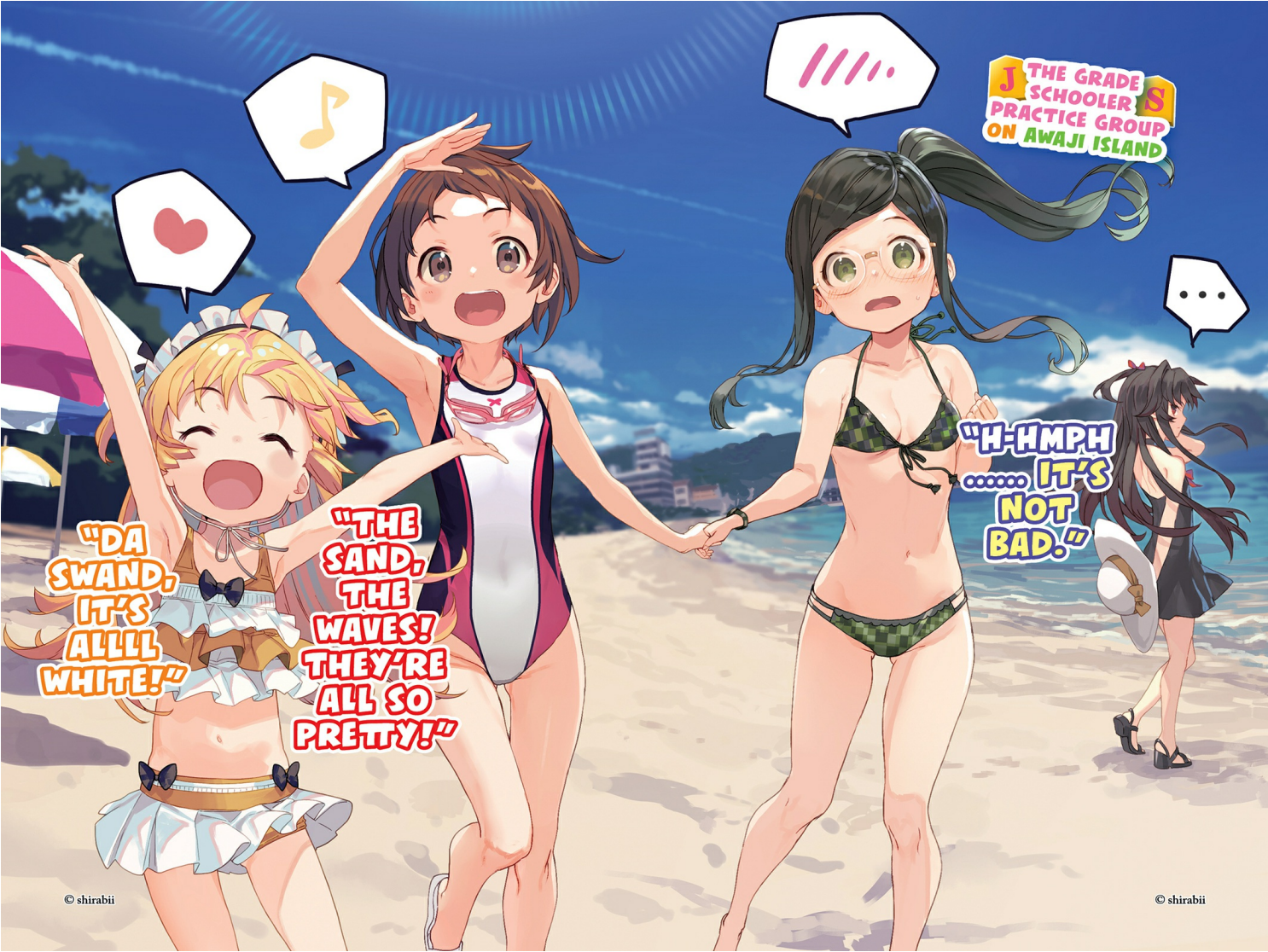
WE'RE COMING
ALONG TO SEE
HER OFF.

©shirabi



"WHEEW
I THOUGHT
WE'D MISSED IT
FOR A SECOND
THERE"

©shirabi



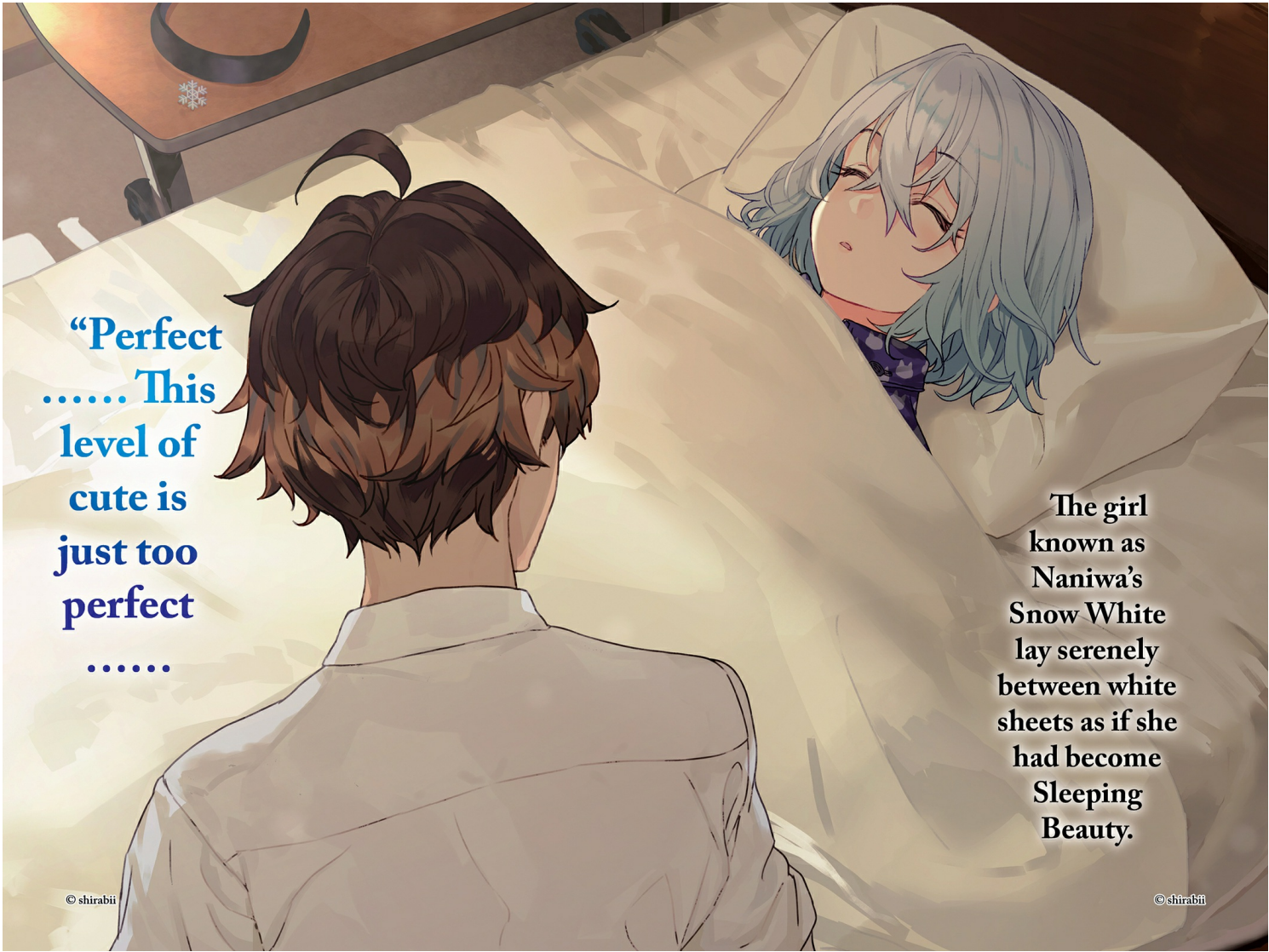
"DA SWAND, IT'S ALLL WHITE!"

"THE SAND, THE WAVES! THEY'RE ALL SO PRETTY!"

"H-HMPH IT'S NOT BAD."

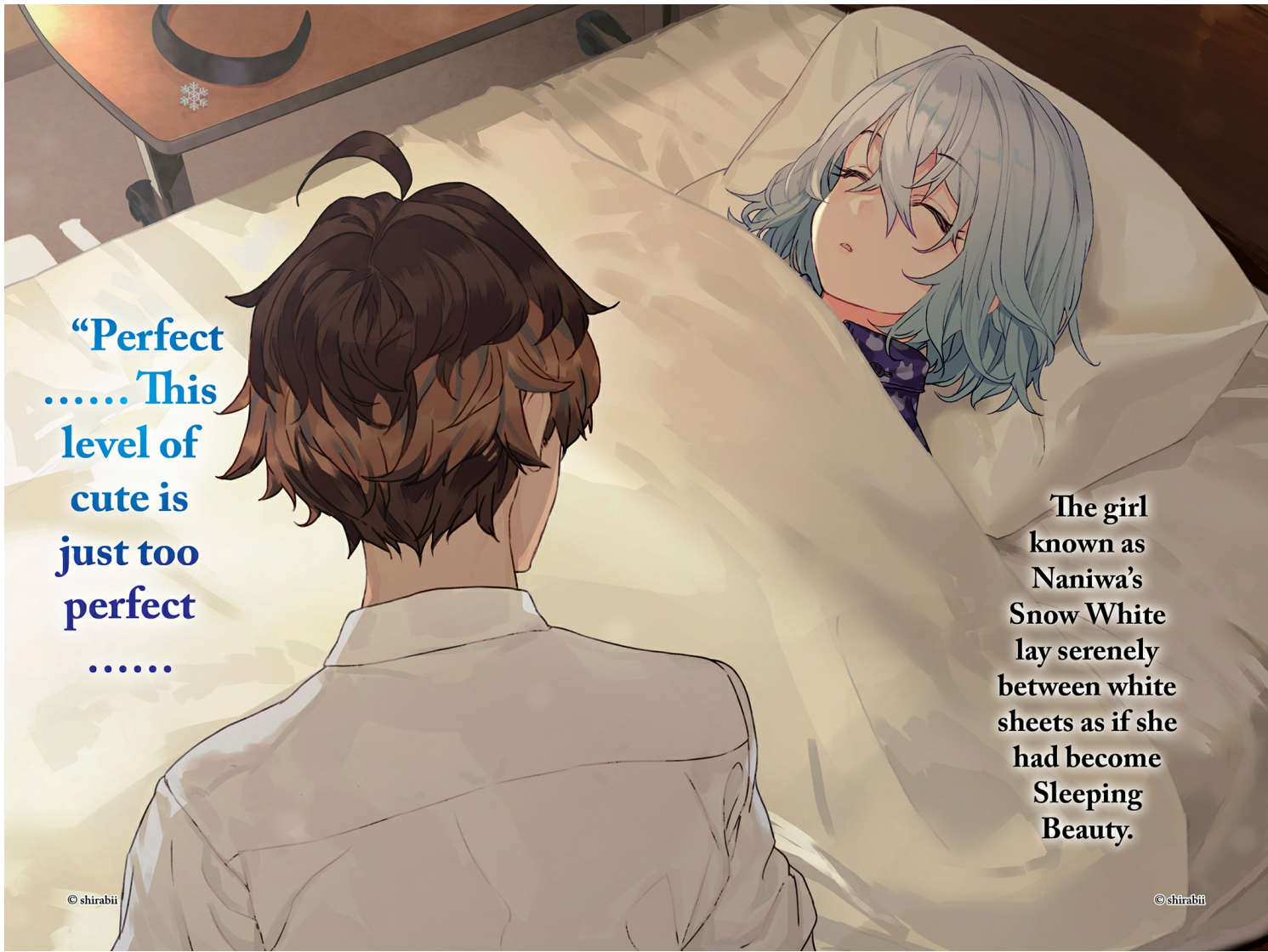
THE GRADE SCHOOL PRACTICE GROUP ON AWAJI ISLAND





“Perfect
..... This
level of
cute is
just too
perfect
.....

The girl
known as
Naniwa’s
Snow White
lay serenely
between white
sheets as if she
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MEET THE CHARACTERS



AI HINATSURU

Women's League player and elementary school fifth-grader. Rode her first plane from Noto Airport, near her hometown, to Tokyo. Would like to ride to the Hokuriku bullet train next.

MIO MIZUKOSHI

Ai's classmate and member of the Practice League. Though she has never ridden an airplane herself, she has seen the "Human Airplane" competition at Lake Biwa in person.



AYANO SADATOU

The Grade Schooler Practice Group member with glasses. Far from riding airplanes, she had never left Kyoto until joining the Practice League.

CHARLETTE ISOIR

From France. Came to Japan by luxury liner but was too young at the time to remember the experience.



AI YASHAJIN

Ai Hinatsuru's younger sister apprentice, Women's League 2-dan. Has only ridden first class on airplanes. Prefers steak for in-flight meals.

UZUTENTSUJI

Banshi, board master. Attempted to bring fresh timber into a highly regulated country only for customs to confiscate it. Screamed obscenities in a drunken rage.



KEIKA KIYOTAKI

Wore a flight attendant uniform during an internship program in high school. Mistaken for an actual airline employee, she spent her last summer vacation fending off advances from the pilot.

YAICHI KUZURYU

Ai Hinatsuru's Master, Dragon King Ryuo. Rode an airplane for the first time to be a match recorder for a title match. Forgot the pieces at the security gate and bawled.



GINKO SORA

First female professional Shogi player in history. Takes airplanes to title matches from time to time but endures ear pain from the air pressure on every trip.

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VOLUME 13

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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Shirabii

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Have you ever felt something for someone, but they didn't feel the same way about you?

Yep. Pretty much everyone has.

At first, it's always one-sided. Either it becomes two-way at some point, or it never changes. Sometimes telling them how you feel takes it to the next step, and sometimes it makes them push you away.

I think what happens most often is it goes nowhere because getting shot down is too scary.

But *being scared* isn't the only reason not to open up.

Like, you know Even if it turns out they have feelings for you too, it'll be long-distance anyway.

A girl mulled over these thoughts endlessly.

Her whole body pulsed with heat whenever she thought about this.

Her heart clenched painfully in her chest.

These thoughts filled her head each night before she fell asleep. What kind of day had they had? Why did it take them those extra minutes to respond to her messages? Those kinds of thoughts.

There was no room for anything else in her mind. She didn't know what to do with herself.

This was a first for her Without any experience, she had no idea how to handle it.

So she wrote letters.

Mountains of them. Whatever crossed her mind, she got it down on paper.

The letters themselves, however, were never finished. Writing all the way to the end was a challenge she couldn't overcome. Relatable, is it not? Of course, she couldn't send any of the letters as they were.

Writing them in secret, she would erase and rewrite line after line before stuffing the paper into her desk drawer. The process would repeat itself night after night.

Thus, the headings of the letters became clearer each time, the content more fluid.

Even if she didn't understand it all, that's fine!

The computer would tell her everything she needed to know. Technology these days was so convenient. The olden times must've been hard, because everyone had to do every little thing by themselves.

If hypothetically?

What if that special someone never noticed her?

What if her feelings for that special someone were always a one-way street?

What if that special someone never thought of her as worthy?

They didn't have to like her back.

She didn't have to be their first.

But at the very least she wanted to be remembered.

Tell me.

Have you ever heard about this?

The opposite of *love* isn't *hate*. It's *indifference*.

Doesn't that just pull at your heartstrings?

The girl wanted to be someone special to them.

They didn't have to like her as long as she was special.

Just as long as, in their eyes, she became an unforgettable part of their life.

In which case, being hated was perfectly okay! They didn't have to like her one bit! She wanted to be special!! So special that they would only think about her forever!!

There was only one way to guarantee it.

A way to make them think about her no matter how much distance was between them.

A way that she could remain special, she could always be the only one.

In other words——

She had to kill them.

TERMINAL:
THE FINAL GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 1



TERMINAL: THE FINAL GRADE SCHOOLER

PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 1



I——Ai Hinatsuru——have a particular habit.

And that is looking up words that I've never heard before.

My mom, the owner and manager of The Hinatsuru Inn, told me I should always do that.

“Ai. Working in this business means that we interact with far more people than the average person. Therefore, we can't afford to be biased or be uninformed about anything.”

It makes sense to me.

So I've looked up everything I didn't understand since then.

I asked people to read difficult characters for me when I was younger, but now I can look up words myself since I can read them on my own.

This habit could be why I discovered Shogi in the first place.

I didn't know anything about it until my family's inn hosted a Ryuo Title Match, so I read some of the books my grandpa left behind to learn how pieces moved and the rules.

But there were tons of hard words in the parts about strategy, so I ended up only doing the puzzle sections

There were so many new things to look up when I first got to Osaka, it was overwhelming.

For example——

Tonshi: Sudden death (Meaning) Perishing despite best efforts. In Shogi terms, a presumably safe King escapes in the wrong direction and gets checkmated.

Lolicon : Lolita complex.

(Meaning) Seeing minors as romantic options.

Ever since I discovered Shogi and became Master's apprentice, I found out that there were a bunch of words I already knew that meant something else to Shogi players. A brand new world opened up to me.

I ended up learning some dirty things that I never wanted to know in that new world, but Knowing about them is part of becoming a grown-up, right?

It's really easy to look anything up on the spot now that I have a smartphone. I can just open my phone on the train and, poof, there's the word.

Here's the last word I looked up.

Ta—minaru: terminal

(Meaning) A place where multiple means of transportation and/or routes converge. For example, *terminal station*; *bus terminal*



Taking the Kanjou Line bright and early to Tennouji Station, I spot a girl dangling her feet from on top of a huge suitcase a few platforms away.

“Mioooo! Good morning!”

Tennouji is one of *South* Osaka's few big stations, so there are platforms everywhere.

It's a modern area of town. The Abeno Harukas building is right by the station. But, go up a few floors, and you can see Osaka's old famous spots like Tsutenkaku Tower and Tennouji Zoo.

The subway connects right to Umeda and Shin Osaka stations and the trains go out to Nara and Wakayama, so this is definitely a terminal station! So many people are always passing through that it's like a big festival every day.

“MIOOO! Heeeey! M-I-OOO!!”

I jump up and down, calling her name and waving my arms. But Mio Mizukoshi is still sitting on her suitcase. She doesn't even look up.

“..... Umm. I guess I'm too far away”

Hehehe! I'll sneak my way over there and surprise her!

“..... Sneaky”

I work my way over to her platform. Then, careful not to make a sound, I get into her blind spot.

Just like my mom taught me, stalk- no, ninja feet.

She made me learn how to not be noticed so that our guests at the inn could relax. To her, it was part of customer service. She's been teaching me for years, so I'm sure I can sneak up on anyone.

That skill has come in handy since coming to Osaka. It's true! Like when I check up on Master's behavior, or when I'm serving tea while working as a match recorder so I don't disturb the players, oh, and when I make sure Master is behaving!

And now, I'm using it to sneak up on Mio. Hehehe Piece of cake.

I watch and wait for a moment. There's a chance she might be trying to surprise *me*, you know?

..... Nope. She has no idea I'm here. That backpack she has on is stuffed so full, I don't think she can see anything behind her. What in the world does she have in there?

Plus, she's looking up at the ceiling and——.

“..... Achin' thrix pond book three”

Uwh

Mio's mumbling something. But it doesn't make sense.

I don't get it But now's my chance!

Sneak, sneak ——Gotcha!



“Miiiiooo!”

“EEEEEP?!”

I tap her shoulders and she’s so surprised that she falls right off her suitcase.

That worked perfectly!

I end up falling over on top of her, too, but I help her up off the floor and ask,
“Ahaha! Did I get you?”

“A- Ai?!”

“Good morning, Mio. What were you mumbling about just now?”

“N-N-N- Nothing!! What are you doing ... scaring me in a train station? It’s dangerous! What if I fell onto the tracks?!”

I was expecting something like ***I’ll get you back! ha-ha***, but she’s actually mad at me. Awe.

“I-I’m sorry You’re right. It’s not safe ... goofing off here”

“Ah! I-I’m not mad at you or anything I’m sorry, too. I wanted today to be fun the whole time”

“! Mio I’m so sorry!”

I bow my head and give her an apology from the bottom of my heart. She’s right. I wasn’t thinking.

I mean, today is——.

“Arrrrgggghhhh——!!!”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Mio?!”

“The train! Our train!! It’s already here!!”

“Uwhee?!”

I was so desperate to apologize that I completely forgot about that!

A completely white train pulled up to the platform and I didn’t even notice. Almost everyone in line has already gotten on.

Oh no!

“Ayano and Charlette are on that train! We’ll never get to meet up with them if we don’t get on!”

“Y-You’re right! Hurry, Ai! Ummm, where’s my reserved seat again? Wh-Which car?!”

That’s when we hear Ayano and Charlette calling out to us.

“Ai! Mio! It’s this one!”

“Mowning!”

They step outside the car and wave their arms over their heads.

Mio pulls her huge suitcase from the front as I push from behind. We zoom across the platform!

“Please, do not rush onto the train,” the stationmaster yells at us.

“Sooorry!”

We make it onto the train just as the door closes! Ayano takes Mio’s suitcase and heaves it onto the luggage shelf with a soft *mnggh*. Charlette’s cheering her on. Okay, that’s cute.

“S-So heavy! What did you put in there?!”

“Ahaha Thanks, Ayano. You really got us out of a jam.”

What a relief that there was an open spot for her suitcase on the shelf.

“Da twain is leabing! Choo-choo!”

“Wheew I thought we’d missed it for a second there”

I breathe a deep sigh of relief now that we’re moving. Missing a train normally wouldn’t be a big deal, but I would’ve hated myself for missing this one for the rest of my life.

“Our seats are ah! Found ’em! Ai, let me flip this one around before you sit down.”

“Sure, Mio! Spin!”

Now we have a four-seat box all to ourselves!

Mio slides down over to the window and puts her overstuffed backpack on

her lap.

“This is an express train *Haruka*, right? I thought reserving seats was a little much, but now we can talk all the way there! Thanks for suggesting this, Ayano!”

“And, getting to put your suitcase on that luggage rack is so nice! Look at all this legroom!”

I’m in the aisle seat, so I’ve got even more space.

And the window: it’s so big! I can see everything outside! Even the seats are comfy and colorful!

“They chose a good nickname for the train, don’t you think? *Haruka*! It sounds like it goes to faraway places all over the world. I get excited just hearing it!”

“Look!” I answer Mio, pointing. “That’s a power outlet and they have free Wi-Fi! My battery is running low, too!”

“Huh? What are you so excited for? All the bullet trains have those. Aren’t they pretty much standard now?”

The very moment Mio criticizes me.

“..... No, they’re not ‘standard.’”

Ayano hasn’t said a word since we sat down, but she starts rattling off facts in a surprisingly low voice.

“Out of all the existing trains in West Japan Railway’s fleet, this one, *Haruka*, was the first to offer outlets and Wi-Fi!”

“Oh, um r-really?”

Mio looks and sounds like she just took a punch she never saw coming. But Ayano’s rush is just getting started!

“What’s more, this *Haruka* isn’t just any *Haruka*! This particular model only started operating this past spring! Not only did they add more cars to the existing model, the new design includes large monitors at both ends of each car. The ceiling was raised 70 mm to accommodate them. They also widened the luggage rack to fit bigger suitcases while changing the design and coloring of each car so customers wouldn’t confuse it with the *Kuroshio* model. Then they

got rid of the old design altogether! Every possible detail has been taken into account to help foreign tourists and sightseers get where they need to go! This *Haruka* is JR's—No, Japan's gift to the world! It's an overwhelming marvel of modern technology!"

Actually Ayano's description is a lot more overwhelming than the train.

Wow I don't really understand most of that, but wow

Meanwhile, Charlette looks about as bored as can be.

"Ayanyo twook pictuwes all da way fwom Kyoto to Tennougi."

Pictures? Of the inside of the train?

I can understand taking pictures out the window, but there's only chairs and trays in here.

Why?

"B-But ... chances to ride a *Haruka* don't come every day! Let alone the newest one! Now that I have these pictures, I can compare the new model to the old 281 series on the way home! Doesn't everyone do that?!"

No, everyone doesn't.

"Cha, Cha was bowed."

Charlette is sitting in her seat, dangling her legs. She was bored, for sure.

Mio leans over to whisper in my ear.

"..... Ayano's always been a bit of a train buff."

"..... I-I never knew that"

She has a lot of hobbies, but I didn't know that trains were one of them. So that's why she was so insistent on reserving tickets for us.

"Do me a favor and make sure she doesn't go too wild the next time you're on a train with her, okay Ai?"

"Ah Sure."

Oh.

I never realized it because Mio was always there to keep her under control

this whole time.

“..... I will, Mio. It’s a p——.”

Just as the word “promise” was coming out of my mouth ...

“?!”

B-Beep!

A news alert pops up on all our phones. We take a look and see what it is.

Breaking News: Shogi Association announces the first female professional in history, Ginko Sora 4-*dan*, will not attend today’s press conference as well. She will release a statement this afternoon.

B-Beep! Ding! Bzzzzzt!

Other phones in the train start going off like the whole car is singing a round. The announcement must be making its way all across Japan right now.

“Ginko Sora She’s Naniwa’s Snow White, yeah? That idol-lookin’ girl.”

“Going pro in Shogi is really really hard to do. But she did it in high school! That’s crazy!”

“Cute and a Shogi wiz. Pretty much a pro at life if you ask me.”

“Word is she’s in the hospital. Seriously, how do you hurt yourself playing Shogi?”

“Rumor has it she was a sickly kid. One site I found online said she’ll never fully recover——.”

People around us start talking. All four of us lean in close to whisper so they won’t hear.

Mio starts, “..... Sora-sensei has really gotten popular.”

“..... All the morning news shows have been talking about her since yesterday. It seems like the general public is more excited to hear about her than Shogi fans,” Ayano adds.

“Tons of *Senseis* have been on TV a whole bunch, too! Like Rokuroba-sensei!

She was on almost every channel last night. Does she ever sleep?"

"Cha, Cha's friend in France, she says dey're tawking abbout Sora-sensei, too!"

"She made the news in France?! That's amazing"

"So, does that mean I can brag about playing against her when I get over there?!"

Mio's eyes light up and she turns to me.

"Hey, hey, Ai. Did Kuzuryu-sensei or Sora-sensei tell you about what the final match in the 3-dan division was like yesterday?"

"Uwhee? Um It was at the Tokyo Association, so I don't know much. I messaged Master a few times after he won the first Crown Title Match, but that's it. He wasn't allowed to have his phone during the match."

"It's over, so he can use it now, right?"

"Yes, but Master went straight to see Sora-sensei in the hospital. Keika and I only reached him because he was in the taxi on his way there I don't think he's left since."

"Oh, I see why you're worried, then"

"..... Uh-huh."

There were two huge matches in the Shogi world yesterday.

The first was Sora-sensei's chance to become a professional player on the final day of the Sub League.

The other was Master in the challenge for the Crown title, the first match in the series.

Both of them happened in Tokyo, so Master left me at Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-dan's house like he always does when he has to travel overnight.

"I got a call from Keika last night," says Mio. "She was gonna come with us today, but she went up to Tokyo to look after Sora-sensei instead, right? She apologized, I don't know, 10, 20 times over the phone."

Yes. Four grade school students traveling by themselves is a little dangerous,

so Keika was supposed to come with us today.

I explain how it all happened.

“The original plan was for Grandpa-*sensei* to go to Tokyo. But Master said Sora-*sensei* might need to stay in the hospital for more than a few days. So she’d need some extra clothes and some things from home. That’s why Keika had to go.”

“Why couldn’t Sora-*sensei*’s mom go?”

“Because there are things only Shogi players would understand. Books on standard strategies, tablets with software installed It sounded like she needed things to study while she’s there. Keika’s the only person who could do everything.”

“If that’s the case, aren’t you and Kiyotaki-*sensei* worried about her? You wanted to go to Tokyo too, didn’t you? Sorry for making you come out here——.”

“Don’t worry about it! I wanted to come with you and I’d just get in the way if I went to Tokyo.”

My heart twinges.

The truth is, I told Master flat-out that I wanted to go to Tokyo with him.

Of course, my plan was to come back to Osaka in time to join this trip, but I don’t think I could have made it back with everything that happened. Worse, I would’ve just been holding Master back.

That’s why I’m glad I stayed in Osaka. Now I am, anyway.

“She needs study material? It sounds like Sora-*sensei* is planning to be in the hospital for a long time. Is she that sick?” asks Ayano.

“Sorry, but I don’t know how much of it is true. Even if I did, I’m not allowed to say anything”

“Ah! I’m sorry I asked!”

She hurriedly covers her mouth with her hands and sounds sad as she says, “I should have known that, considering your position, Ai. I won’t be bringing up this topic again I should have been more thoughtful.”

“..... I’m sorry, too.”

Just as the air starts getting heavy, Charlette chimes in.

“Cha, Cha hates stwudying!”

“Me too, Charlette! If I hafta be in the hospital, lemme be a couch potato!”

Mio backs Charlette right away, sliding down in her chair just like her.

Ayano, on the other hand, asks Mio harshly, “Mio, you need to study now more than ever. Have you made any progress?”

“Please, don’t ask”

He-he-he. But, I’ve seen it myself.

On the platform back at the station, Mio was trying her hardest to memorize something.

That had to be

“Kujyuru-*sensei* doesn’t need to be there, but Sora-*sensei* will be fine as long as Keika is looking after her! But, enough about that. I’ve got a big announcement to make! News that’ll make you forget all about Sora-*sensei*!”

“Nushu?”

Charlette, still trying to get comfortable in a chair way too big for her, sits up with a start.

Mio’s *big news*. It’s——.

“Time for presents!”

“Presents?”

Mio tries, but fails, to keep down a giggle at our surprise and pats the overstuffed backpack on her lap.

Then she reaches inside and pulls something out.

“Here, this is for you, Ayano.”

“Huuh?! This Mio, it’s the autographed red lacquer fan you received after winning the King of Naniwa Tournament, is it not?! That’s Chairman Tsukimitsu’s handwriting, *attention to detail*, right there——.”

“Yep, yep. You like writing a lot, Ayano, so I thought the *attention to detail* fits you better!”

“Th- Thank you! I’ll treasure it, you have my word!!”

Ayano is so touched, she’s shaking.

Mio rustles around in her backpack for a moment and pulls out the next one.

“For you, Charlette! My Shogi water bottle!”

“Waooooooh!”

Charlette, giddy, takes the Shogi piece-shaped bottle that Mio always brought to our practice sessions from her with both hands.

I don’t think it’s all that easy to use, but it’s the cutest thing ever! Charlette always bit her fingers with envy whenever she saw Mio with it. I guess Mio must have noticed.

“B-But ... are you sure? This is really valuable,” asks Ayano. She hasn’t budged since Mio gave her the fan.

“I want you to have it! Besides——,” answers Mio with a grin.

“You’ll remember me more if you have things that used to be mine, right?”

I gulp the moment she says that.

This *Haruka* train’s last stop is Kansai International Airport.

From there she’ll get on a plane and Mio Mio will go overseas all by herself.

We’re coming along to see her off.

This trip is to say goodbye.

That’s why we didn’t say anything until she brought it up herself, almost like she wouldn’t have to go if we didn’t talk about it

Ayano was so happy when Mio gave her that fan, but now she looks completely serious.

“..... Even without this, I will never forget about you. How could I ever forget?!”

“I know, I know. But I’d still like you to have it.”

Ayano isn’t sure how to feel, but Charlette couldn’t be happier with her present. Does she know that today is Mio’s last day in Japan? I’m a bit worried

.....

“Alrighty.”

Mio sits up straight, puts her knees together, and turns to face me.

“!!”

It’s my turn!

My imagination runs wild, excited to find out what my present is. But Mio just opens her arms and says, “Ai I don’t have a thing for you!”

“Uwhee?!”

“I mean, you’re a Women’s League *sensei* and you live with the Ryuo! Everyone’s talking about the Kiyotaki Shogi family, and you’re in it! All of my Shogi stuff would be junk to you! Junk!”

“It’s true that any boards or pieces that Kuzuryu-*sensei* has used are worth a considerable amount of money, and now Sora-*sensei*’s are so valuable they’re priceless.”

“Uwheee But”

Sure, I sometimes take one of Master’s handkerchiefs to my matches without telling him, but O-Of course, I wash them and return them!! Just without telling him

But! That’s not the same as one from a friend!

“.....”

And also? If she wants to give me a present there’s one thing I’ve been wanting for a long time.

Mio said she doesn’t have *a thing* for me.

If I asked for something that wasn’t *a thing*, would she make it come true?

“..... Um, Mio? In that case——.”

I can feel the tears building as I try to find the right words. Mio, on the other hand, is biting her lip to keep from laughing as she reaches into the front pocket of her backpack.

“So—I wrote this for you!”

“Huh? What is?”

“A letter.”

She holds out a folded piece of cute pink paper.

There’s even a golden Shogi piece sticker sealing it shut.

To Miss Ai Hinatsuru is written in her handwriting on the top.

“You already have everything that I have when it comes to Shogi goods and stuff like that. That’s why I thought I’d write down how I feel and give that to you instead.”

Mio has her own style of handwriting, clear but full of energy. Those are her characters.

Just seeing them spell out my name warms my heart The corners of my eyes are heating up, too.

“Ah! Don’t open it yet, okay? I’ll get embarrassed if you read it in front of me,” Mio says as she fidgets. “Buuuut ... I still want to see the look on your face, so promise me you’ll read it before I get on the plane!”

“Then, which is it?”

“Dat’s shewfish, Miow!” Ayano and Charlette say as they look at my letter with envy.

“I want you to read it when I say *read it*. Then you know what? I’ll hang onto it! I’ll give it back to you at the airport!”

“Okay! It’s a promise, but don’t forget, alright?”

I nod and give the letter back to her. Mio slips it back into her backpack’s front pocket.

What does it say?

Is it gonna make me cry? I don't know if I'll be able to stop it But I have to send Mio off with a smile!

"Speaking of letters, what about the ones we gave you at the going away party at school? Did you read everyone's yet, Mio?"

"Yep, sure did! I thought everybody was just going to sign a big card, but everyone made one just for me. We were only fifth grade classmates for one semester, but I'm going to miss you....."

Mio and I go to the same school. We've been in the same class since fourth grade.

Her transfer arrangements were made before the school year began, but she stayed for the second semester opening ceremony. Our class had a party for her that afternoon.

"You were all smiles all time, Mio, but everyone else cried. Mihane was beside herself"

At first, she was saying things like, *"If you're transferring, then don't bother showing up to the opening ceremony! You should've just taken off after last semester ended!"* and being kind of mean, but—.

"Seeing you here I'm going to miss you so much! A semester without you is too long!!"

Once she started bawling, the rest of the class cried along with her.

"Talk about a surprise! I thought she hated me."

"I don't think anyone at school hates you, Mio. I mean, you don't hate anyone either, do you?"

"That's true. I was always careful to stay on everyone's good side," Mio answered without missing a beat. "..... It's my way of getting stronger."

Her way? Having lots of friends?

No, wait She gets stronger that way?

I'm trying to figure out what she meant by that, but it looks like she said it so quietly that only I heard her.

"But I'm glad your departure date was set for September," says Ayano. "I was

certain you would leave as soon as the first semester finished

She's clutching the fan that Mio gave her to her chest like a precious treasure.

"I am, of course, sad to see you go, but we had a wonderful summer together. That local festival in the shopping arcade I'll remember it for the rest of my life."

"Aha-ha! It got rained out halfway through, but that just made it even more fun! We got to play Shogi with everyone at school during the storm!"

"Your parents have already moved, right? Didn't you want to go with them?"

"Papa gets so caught up in his work that Mama has to be there to take care of him. She's never been outside Japan before, so it'd be really hard to look after both me and him at the same time, don't you think? That's why they decided to get a head start and have me fly over later."

Mio's father is a researcher for a big international pharmaceutical company.

Back when I was having a tough time after Master took Ten-chan as an apprentice, I asked Mio about some drugs. What kind of drugs? Truth serums, of course!

"And I wanted to hang out with you guys as much as I could. It's our last chance, you know! There was some paperwork since I'm leaving the Practice League, so everything worked out great."

"So, that's why you've been staying at your grandpa's house!"

"Yep, he only lives a few blocks away. The only problem is he keeps telling me to *stay and live with him* every single day. It's not like we're never going to see each other again!"

..... But, he misses you. We all do.

The words almost come out, but I stop them just in time.

It's Mio who's going to be the loneliest. So long as she can put on a happy face, it's up to us to smile and laugh along with her!

"School over there doesn't start until October. Can't you stay in Japan a little longer?"

Smile, smile

It seems the harder I try not to say anything, the easier it is for Mio's leaving to come up. Sigh

Even still, Mio answers with a smile.

"First, I've gotta go to some language school, I think? I can't do anything if I can't talk to anyone."

"Wouldn't it be easier to go to a Japanese school the way Charlette goes to a school for French students?"

"I guess I could, but I wanna make friends as long as I'm over there, you know? I wanna teach everyone at school how to play Shogi!"

""Ohhh!""

Mio going to make friends to play Shogi with because there isn't anyone who already knows. That's just like her!

"I asked my Master, Kuresaka-*sensei*, and she gave me a whole bunch of boards and pieces! And I'm taking them all with me. That's what's in my suitcase!"

"Are you saying I lifted all those heavy things onto the luggage rack?" Ayano mumbles in shock after hearing that Mio's suitcase was full of armrests and thick, high-quality boards.

"By the way I don't think I ever asked you. What country are you moving to, Mio?"

"Hm? What was it again? Something *-land* I'd never heard of it before."

"I'm very worried about you"

Knowing that her friend is about to get on a plane to a country she can't even remember makes Ayano turn pale.

Uh-huh. I'm worried, too

"It doesn't really matter, does it? It's not like the whole country is surrounded by water like Japan. Anyone that's in a country that's part of the EU can go anywhere they want. If Shogi gets popular somewhere else, I can just go there and play!"

"I've heard that Shogi is gaining popularity in places with a high Japanese

population like Hawaii and Brazil.”

Just like Ayano said, Shogi is starting to make waves in Hawaii.

I’m pretty sure that Ryuo Title matches have been held in France and Germany before, so there are probably people who can play over there somewhere.

“Charlette. What’s Shogi like in Europe? Do kids play at school?”

“Wha?”

Charlette has been watching out the window but gives Mio a confused look.

“Cha, Cha neber pwayed Shogi in Fwance.”

“..... That means I can be a pioneer!”

What a positive angle. That’s just like Mio.

Just then, Charlette looks back out the window and squeals with delight.

“Woooah! Da oshen!”

“The ocean?!”

Suddenly it’s all blue outside Even the light coming in sparkles with the waves.

It’s like the train is following a track through nothing but air on its way to the man-made island in the distance.

Looking out the window, it’s just the sea, the sky, and that little island on the horizon.

The view is bringing back lots of memories.

That’s our destination—Kansai International Airport.

It’s in sight, but Mio stands up with a start.

“Ngh Where’s the toilet?”

“Oh! *Haruka*’s restrooms have been fitted to accommodate wheelchairs! Please, take a picture for——!”

“Are you trying to make me have an accident?!”

She runs off, clutching her tummy. Ayano sits with her camera out as we

watch her go.

“I’ve never seen her so nervous,” she says.

Nervous?

Oh, because she’s about to get on a plane?

“That’s a first. I didn’t think Mio ever got nervous.”

“..... From what I can tell, Mio is always nervous when you’re around, Ai.”

“Huh?”

Wait What is she talking about? I started to ask, but Ayano and Charlette are happily looking out the window. I missed my chance.

One more thing.

The word *terminal* has another meaning besides a place where people gather Something completely different.

That’s—the end, a conclusion.

That artificial island in the distance is now really close. The train is speeding the whole Grade Schooler Practice Group to the airport.

It’s the last stop we’ll ever have as a group.



“Woow! It’s huge in here!!”

We’ve arrived at Terminal 1 in Kansai International Airport, and the decorations in here are astounding.

The building doesn’t look like much from outside getting off the train.

But one step inside and it’s amazing!

Especially the fourth floor, where all the international counters are crowded together and people from all over the world are coming and going. The ceiling is hypnotic!

Mio looks up at it while rolling her suitcase behind her and starts talking to

me.

“You’ve been here before, right?”

“I have! Master and I left from here when we went to Hawaii for his title match.”

“Hawaii!! I’m so jealous! Why couldn’t Papa have been transferred there instead?!”

It was the first match of the Ryuo Title Match last year.

I went there with other players from Kansai like Chairman Tsukimitsu, his secretary Miss Oga and other members of the Kiyotaki Shogi family. We all met here in this lobby before getting on the plane.

The Meijin and his group left from Narita Airport in Tokyo, so we didn’t see them until we landed in Honolulu. From there, we got in a limousine So many memories.

I have some fun memories from Hawaii, and some not so fun.

Bittersweet, like dark chocolate.

Just thinking about it made my heart sting until not too long ago.

But now I think of what happened with Master back then as what helped him get stronger. Sure, I hate being away from him, but

I try to sound upbeat and start explaining.

“You’ll need to go to the international gate area after going through security, okay? There’s a driverless train that will take you out to where your plane is!”

“There’s a train inside the airport?! WHOA!! I wanna ride it!”

“Hmmm Its official name is the *Wing Shuttle*. This pamphlet says it can travel at 30 km an hour.”

Ayano hasn’t said anything since she picked up a pamphlet inside the front door. Adjusting her glasses, she starts recounting things written on it one by one. It’s different from a real train, but I guess it’s close enough to get her attention. She *is* a fanatic

By the way, Ayano loves reading about anything and everything.

Books, pamphlets, whatever: Ayano reads and understands it right away.

I've heard she always gets good grades in school. That must be nice I'm good at a few subjects, but I'm horrible at the rest. I like books about Shogi, but the ones that explain strategy are hard to understand and make me sleepy Sigh.

Charlette comes up to Ayano and tugs at her shirt.

"Cha, Cha wants to see pwanse!"

"I wanna see the plane I'm gonna ride, too! Is there a spot where we can go to see it together?"

"Oh! There's——."

Just as I start explaining,

"The Kansai Airport doesn't have a typical *deck* where visitors can watch the planes. You will need to take a complimentary bus over to the *Skyview* observation area."

Thwmp!

Ayano opens the pamphlet and reads it out loud before I can get in another word. I wanted to say that

"So, you won't be able to watch my plane take off?"

"Actually, there's a trade secret."

"Trade secret?!"

"Exit the airport from the fourth floor and follow the pedestrian path all the way to the end, and we should be able to see the planes waiting their turn to take off."

She did that much research?!

Wait How in the world did she find out about that?

"But I hear that it's a very limited view. Most of the planes are blocked by the airport building. And you can't see the runway."

"A-Ayano Aren't you a little too in-the-know? This is your first time here, right? How did you get *trade secrets*?"

“Through the grapevine Just like the way some train fans love taking pictures, airplane enthusiasts called *spotters* have their own network. That’s where I read about it.”

“S-Spot- ter? Anything like Harry Potter?”

“Not even close. They are people who spot airplanes.”

I still don’t get it.

Ayano goes on to say that people who enjoy taking pictures of individual plane models call themselves spotters. But instead of going sightseeing in other countries, they prefer taking pictures of the inside of the plane and the model number so they can refer back to them later.

I listen to what she’s saying, but I just can’t understand what people find so interesting about coming all the way to the airport just to take pictures of a model number

“Is it like the websites that talk for hours about what Shogi players order for lunch, maybe?”

That seems to be a good enough comparison for Mio.

“Still, you can see my plane from that path once it takes off, right? Wave at me and I’ll try to find you on the way up!”

“Sure!”

That’s a promise!

Mio gives us all a huge smile.

“Alrighty! What’s the first thing I have to do now that I’m here? Go to security?”

“First, you have to go to the airline service counter. They’ll give you your boarding pass and take your luggage. It’s a lot easier to walk around when you don’t have a big suitcase.”

I explain the process. This time, I’m faster than Ayano.

“Wow, you Women’s League senseis know your stuff! You guys are used to traveling all over the place! I’m glad I’ve got you here to help, Ai!”

He-he-he. That was nice of her to say!

“We had to wait in line a long time when we went to Hawaii, so we’d better go to the counter right away. Mio, what’s the airline? JAL? ANA?”

“Umm, let me see. It’s



I’ve never heard of the airline that Mio is taking.

Actually, I can’t even tell how to pronounce it. Trusting some unknown company with my friend’s life is a little scary.

“C-Can we trust this company? I’ve never heard the name before, their counter is tucked in a back corner in the middle of nowhere, and no one else in line is Japanese

“According to the website I found, they had an accident two years ago and only recently resumed business operations.”

“I’m dead I’m so dead

Why did you have to say that, Ayano?!

“B-But, look! The person behind the counter is Japanese! Ask her as many questions as you want before you get on! Then you don’t have to worry, right?!”

“I agree. No one will understand Japanese once you’re on the plane, so now is the time to gather information. The correct brace posture, for example

AYANO!!!

Everyone’s worried, but Mio doesn’t have a choice. She has to take their airplane. Just like in Shogi, there are no *mulligans* with air travel.

Mio starts to get ahold of herself once she understands that.

Shogi really taught her how to hang tough!

But she gets more anxious the closer we get to the front of the line. Fidgeting, she turns to me to say, “I-It feels like I’m waiting for one of those surprise bag

inspections at school

“Relax, Mio. You’re allowed to have manga and toys with you here.”

“Agh! I totally forgot to get back from her the manga Kanegasaka-sensei took away from me!”

Misao Kanegasaka-sensei is our class 5-4’s homeroom teacher. She’s good at teaching, but she’s stricter than all the other teachers at school.

She found out that Mio brought a volume of old baseball manga to lend to one of the boys and confiscated it, but——.

“That manga was yours?! She had the whole series on her desk when I went to talk to her.”

“She bought the rest?!”

It’s our turn at the counter before we know it.

Mio rolls her suitcase up to it, undoes the lock and shows the woman what’s inside her backpack.

“Do you have a mobile smartphone battery with you?”

“Nope! I don’t!”

“Any liquids?”

“Yes! In these little bottles here!”

Big bottles aren’t allowed on planes, so Mio had to pour them all into little bottles from a 100-yen shop. “This one is soy sauce, this is ketchup, that’s my mother’s recipe,” she explains one by one. That’s a lot of sauces.

The woman holds one of the bottles up to the light and asks, “What is this here? Lighter fluid is strictly prohibited——.”

“Oh! That’s camellia oil!”

“Camellia oil? Is it a beauty product? Or for aromatherapy?”

“No, no. It’s to clean my Shogi boards.”

“Sh-Shogi boards?”

“Yes. That’s what these wooden boards are here. That one’s eight inches

thick, this one is two. The pieces are in these boxes here. Oh, and this is a chess clock, those come together to make a piece stand, that's a fan Ah! It's signed by the Meijin, so should I have declared it under valuables?!"

"....."

Mio explains as she takes things out of her suitcase one by one. She's being very detailed, but the woman doesn't know about Shogi, so all the extra information is just making her more confused.

Mio must be really nervous because she is talking a lot faster than she usually does.

And, that leads to——.

"What's this?"

"I've never seen it before"

"Let the supervisor know"

Airline employees are having a meeting behind the counter!

"Ughhh This is just like the time I found that endangered lizard and the teachers called me into the office"

Mio Why would you pick it up?

It looks like they can't make a decision on their own, so one of them leaves to go talk to their manager.

"I apologize, Miss Mizukoshi. Can I ask you to wait for the time being?"

"Oh, yes! I'm fine, but"

She looks back at us apologetically, but we smile and nod.

"I can wait with you!"

"I also don't have any plans today."

"Cha, Cha's gonna stay wid Miow!"

So we get out of the line and find a spot close to the counter to wait for them to make up their minds.

Mio anxiously says, "..... This is turning into a big deal"

“Aha-ha. You’re probably the first person who’s ever tried to take oil for cleaning Shogi boards onto an airplane.”

It’s a foreign company, too, so they might not even know what Shogi is. It wasn’t in their manual, that’s for sure.

“But Ai? What did you do for the title match if you couldn’t take camellia oil with you? The Ryuo Title Match started in Hawaii, didn’t it?”

“Yes, but that board was used for just that one match. Don’t you think they cleaned it in Japan before they went?”

“Ah, I gotcha.”

“But who knows how many years you’ll be over there. There’s a chance you’ll need to clean the boards, so I think you’ll need that oil, Mio,” I tell her, but Ayano has a question.

“You say so, but simply wiping the board with a cloth is enough in most cases. I can’t think of a situation where the board would get so filthy that you would need something extra

Mio’s answer is lightning quick.

“What if I use one as a table and spill noodles by accident?”

“The problem there isn’t how to clean. You’re not supposed to do that to begin with

Master would kick me out of the Shogi family if I ever ate off one of his boards. The Kiyotaki line is very strict about that.

“And ... oh yeah! They’ll get dirty if I play Shogi outside, right?!”

“Outside? Like, on a picnic?”

“There’s the mountains and the beach, too. Foreigners like doing things outside, don’t they? Saltwater and sea breezes would dry out the boards real quick.”

“Playing Shogi on the beach? Who’d ever Wait, we did

More accurately, we *meant to*.

It looks like Mio remembers exactly what I’m talking about and looks off to

nowhere in particular with nostalgia in her eyes.

“That’s right. All of us went to Awaji Island.”

“It’s already been over a year. My first summer in Osaka, a big trip to the beach but it was actually a Shogi field trip practice session.”

But it’s not the beach or even the Shogi that I remember most about that day
.....

It looks like we’ll be here a while.

Now’s a good time to reminisce.

While we’re waiting for an official decision on whether camellia oil can be taken onto an airplane or not, the four of us relive that trip to the beach——.



GRADE SCHOOL SUMMER VACATION



I Ai Hinatsuru heard how this all started from the man who owns *Twelve* when no one else was around. It seemed to start out something like this.

“I’ll have the butter rice.”

First floor of the Kansai Shogi Association building at the restaurant called *Twelve*.

Since the restaurant is inside the building, they make and deliver food for players to eat during lunch. My Master, Yaichi Kuzuryu-*sensei*, and his older sister apprentice, my Aun- Ginko Sora-*sensei*, have been regulars here for more than 10 years.

They sat side-by-side at the counter and ordered lunch a little later than usual. Both said what they wanted without looking at the menu.

“Dynamite, C Set.”

“..... You always order that, don’t you, Big Sis?”

“Problem?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that, but”

“Then, why are you eating butter rice like a child, Yaichi? It’s about time you started acting like you’re a title holder, don’t you think?” Sora-*sensei* snapped back at her mumbling little brother apprentice.

So, Master explained his reasoning as clearly and as upbeat as he could.

“Butter rice always looks so good when Ai orders it. She let me have a bite the other day and it was fantastic! Seriously, it’s the kind of flavor you get hooked on. You should try it for yourself, Big Sis. I’ll let you have some of mine.”

“.....”

Ai—bringing up Ai Hinatsuru, the name of the elementary school girl living

with him (That's me! He's talking about me!), made Sora-sensei's mood turn sour.

Her already sharp glare turned even sharper, and she puffed her cheeks just a little bit. He-he-he!

"Here you are, one butter rice."

"Thanks! Yeah, that's the stuff♪"

Master respectfully took the plate with both hands, but he didn't notice Sora-sensei's angry stare. That butter rice was all he was thinking about!

Mixed in with a full plate of golden rice were big helpings of shrimp, mushrooms and green peppers.

Then he took in the warm wonderful smell.

There's not much to butter rice, but I love it. It's the best and it reminds me of a very important day in my life.

Anyway, Sora-sensei's mouth watered so much that she had to gulp it all down.

Ohhhhh? Didn't she just say butter rice was for children? The body can't lie, can it? It's because she is still smooth and flat in *those* places!

"What do you think, Big Sis? Doesn't it look delicious? You can have some if you want?"

"....."

Stare Sora-sensei's eyes were locked onto Masters butter rice, but then followed his spoon up to his lips. Hmmm!

She changed the subject, but her bangs seemed to bug her the whole time.

"..... More importantly, we need to talk about the trip next week."

"Oh, yeah. Yes, we do."

The Mynavi Women's Open Shogi Tournament Preliminaries had just ended. The Shogi world's short summer vacation had started.

As the Queen title holder, Sora-sensei will have to wait until the Mynavi Finals are over to find out who she has to play. But she had the five-match Women's

Throne Title Match and a chance to promote into the Sub League's 3-*dan* division to worry about before then.

On top of all that, she'll have even less time once school starts up again. So she absolutely needed this *getaway* Shogi camp to get better as quickly as possible.

..... That's what she wanted everyone to think, but I'm sure what she really wanted was an excuse to be alone with Master away from me and the others!

"We're going where you go every year on Awaji Island, right? The inn close to the beach."

"Yes, we are, but There's been a snag."

"Huh? What could possibly come up with a place that only has sand?"

"It's not the location There've been some cancellations"

"Cancellations? Who?"

"Sir Ayumu"

"Sir? You mean Kannabe-*sensei*? Why?"

"Apparently, the designer for his favorite foreign brand up and decided to put on a last-minute show here in Japan, and he wants to go there instead."

Ayumu Kannabe-*sensei* is a professional Shogi player from Kanto and also one of Master and Sora-*sensei*'s oldest friends.

He likes to call himself Ayumu God Cauldron and is rather unique. Like ... he wears capes. Since I hadn't met anyone else from Kanto, I thought everyone over there was like that at first.

Sora-*sensei* knew what God-*sensei* is like but gave up with an annoyed sigh.

"He never changes"

"Nope"

Everyone in the Shogi world has their own values and tastes. It's said that the ones who stay true to who they are no matter what other people say are the ones who become professionals So I think that Sora-*sensei* is jealous that God-*sensei* doesn't feel any pressure.

... Because going back on a promise isn't an option for her.

Especially not when the new plan has nothing to do with Shogi

Gaps in talent show up in little ways like this every day. They leave marks on your heart that pop up the next time you play against them.

That's why the best way to protect yourself is to pretend not to care. Watching Master recently, I've learned that being oblivious is a talent too.

"Well, one less person won't make much of a——."

"A-About that Other people have canceled, too"

"Who?"

"All of the guys, other than me"

"HEY?!"

"Yes?!!"

Wham! Sora-sensei hit the table hard. All those years of living with her made Master reflexively jump out of his chair and protect himself.

Sora-sensei stood over him in a fighting stance and said threateningly, "That's almost everyone!"

"See? That's the snag."

"They've found replacements, right?"

"If they had, I wouldn't be here talking to you about it, Big Sis"

"Those little It's common courtesy to send someone else in your place when you can't attend a practice session. Do professionals and Sub League members have no sense of responsibility?"

"Umm Well, these trips have never been strictly practice sessions I mean, we spend most of our time on the beach"

"Maybe so, but the point of spending so much time together is to delve deeper into each other's Shogi senses than you normally could, right? That's clearly a *practice session*. And they just——."

"Big Sis. Your phone just buzzed."

Sora-sensei broke off in the middle of her rant. Apparently, seeing the look of relief on Master's face irked her.

I'll punch him after this is the look she had on her face when she picked up the phone and saw—.

"..... A message? I wonder who Huh?!"

"Wh-What's wrong?! Who's it from, Big Sis?"

"..... Machi."

"Machi sent you a message? What does it say?"

Machi Kugui-sensei holds the Yamashiro Oka title and is one of Kansai's best-known players. She's also been close with Master and Sora-sensei since they were kids just like God-sensei.

Born into a family that descended from nobles in Kyoto, there are a few irritating things about her, like her chest size, but she isn't the type to break a promise is what Sora-sensei thought (I don't think so, though. I see her as a second Master, really!).

At least she did until reading that message.

"..... Her family decided to take a trip out of the blue and now she would like to cancel her spot"

"Whaaat?! With her gone, it would just be the two of us going!"

"T-True"

"What are we supposed to do now? Canceling reservations will cost money and finding people to take their places now is going to be a major pain," Master groaned with his head in his hands on the counter.

Meanwhile, Sora-sensei kept saying "true," but couldn't leave her bangs alone. Then she completely changed her tone.

"B-But Maybe it's easier this way? W-We can have the place to ourselves"

"Huuuh? That'd be exactly the same as us practicing in the Association Player's Room like we always do! That's boring."

“Ugh

Sora-sensei’s shoulders drooped. Pwf-he-he-he!

“We’ve got to invite some more people I got it! How about we invite Keika?”

“Huh? W-Well, sure That’s okay If it’s, Keika

“Hang on, I’ll call her right now!”

“Um

Too bad, Auntie, too bad. Pwf-he-he-he!

Keika Kiyotaki is Kousuke Kiyotaki, Master and Sora-sensei’s Master’s, only daughter.

She’s almost more than family to the two of them after they spent over 10 years living under the same roof as Grandpa-sensei’s live-in apprentices.

Kind of like an older sister Well, maybe closer to a mother?

“Hello, Keika? It’s Yaichi. You got a minute? Yeah. You know how we’re going to Awaji Island next week? The trip we take every year. Yeah.”

“

Master knew there was no way she would turn him down. He started explaining the details as Sora-sensei watched with mixed emotions. It’s obvious what she had in mind!

“The thing is, a bunch of people have canceled last minute. Yeah, exactly! So I was wondering if you’d like to come along. Oh, no, no! We can help you get ready for the Mynavi Finals, no sweat! Win one more and you’re officially a Women’s League player! He-he!”

Keika was still training to join the Women’s League.

Normally she’d have to promote another rank in the Practice League, but there’s a special rule that allows amateurs with good tournament results to become Women’s League players. It’s really hard to do, but

Keika made it through the Preliminaries.

Her first opponent in the Finals was set: Women’s Legend Rina Shakando.

Master tried to use that to convince her that a big practice session is just what she needed.

“So what do you think? Can you come? It’s Monday to Tuesday next week. Big Sis and I are the only ones going right now, so you don’t have to worry about Huh? Keika? You’re not feeling well? But you sounded just fine until a second ago It snuck up on you? Food poisoning? A-Are you okay?!”

Keika That was so obvious

“..... Yes, okay. Alright. Hm? Big Sis? She’s right here next to me, why?”

Master is so trusting that he fell for her big fat lie right off the bat.

“..... Yeah Okay, I’ll tell her Feel better soon”

Master hung up the phone but was clearly confused.

Sora-sensei nervously worked up the courage to ask, “..... What did Keika have to say?”

“I’m not really sure. She says she’s not feeling well, and we should go on without her.”

“I-I see I hope she’s okay”

“Oh, and she wanted me to tell you to *try harder than you ever have in your life.*”

“S-She did?”

“What is there to *try hard* for? The two of us are just going on an overnight trip to practice Shogi.”

“..... Haaaa.”

Sora-sensei blushed and stared at her feet. Mrgh!!

But Master was too spaced out to notice that or Keika’s scheme. Oblivious

“Aw, man. I was really looking forward to this trip. I’ve been so busy with my apprentice since she showed up last spring that I haven’t really had time to do anything with players my own age. This trip was going to be my chance to relax with everybody.”

“I-I see That’s too bad”

“No kidding.”

“L-Looks like there’s no choice but for the two of us to go which is too bad.”

“What a waste. It’ll cost money to cancel those extra rooms”

“B-But with the trip so soon, finding five people to go with us is impossible, isn’t it?”

“Yes, you’re right”

Sora-sensei lit up like she had the words *a trip to the beach, just the two of us!* written all over her face. M-Master! Noooo!!

Then, almost like he heard my heart screaming out—.

“Hm? Five?”

That’s when it came to him in a flash.

Five people who weren’t professional players or Women’s League players—five elementary school girls.



“Wow! The beach!!”

Mio presses her face up against the window and shouts with glee while Keika drives the big van with all of the Grade Schooler Practice Group members inside. We all look outside.

“It’s the Akashi Strait!” Ayano, the smartest of all of us, says.

“Cha?! Cha’s neber been to a bweach in Japon!!”

“Ch-Charlette!! You’ll get hurt jumping around in the car like that!”

Charlette can’t contain her excitement and gets out of her seat for a closer look!

There’s someone sitting at the very back corner of the van trying to ignore the rest of us.

“Hmph Such a child. It’s just the ocean. No big deal.”

The fifth member of our group: Ai Yashajin.

She's my younger sister apprentice, but she is already as good as the *senseis* in the Women's League. Almost no one in the Practice League can win against her.

She's a bit of a loner and not the easiest to talk to, but that's not stopping Mio.

"That's because you live in Kobe, Ten-chan! You see the beach every day."

"Hey, what's this *Ten-chan* nonsense?! Are you addressing me?!"

"Yep! I was thinking *Yasshi* at first because *Yashajin*, but *Ten-chan*, after the first Chinese character in your name, sounds so much cuter, don't you think?!"

Mio grins like she's expecting a thank you, but Ten-chan is so angry that she whacks her in the back of the head a few times.

"B-Be serious, will you?! What right do you have to address me by a nickname when I outrank you?! I won't allow it, ever!"

"But everyone calls you that already in the Practice League."

"That's your fault to begin with!! We aren't pals, friends or anything of the sort!"

"Okay, um Ten-san?"

"I am not Tien Shinhan!!"

Ten-chan watches more anime than I thought!

"Tenshii han!"

"You stay out of this, half pint! I'll make you cry!!"

Not even Charlette is safe from Ten-chan's rampage. B-Be nice!

Ayano and I jump in to stop her.

"T-Ten-chan, calm down"

"Listen to her, Ten-chan. Charlette is only six, so she doesn't know any better."

"Which is why I'm teaching her not to use weird nicknames out of the blue!"

When suddenly a teasing voice comes from the driver's seat.

"I don't see the problem. It's cute, if you ask me. *Ten-chan*."

"..... Old Hag."

"Yes, yes, Old Hag Keika, at your service my lady. Now, here's some nice candy for you to suck on."

Then Keika pulls hard candy out of a polka-dotted plastic baggie and tauntingly shakes them in the palm of her hand.

She and Ten-chan have played each other twice in the Practice League, and Keika won convincingly in their second match. Since she got the last laugh, Ten-chan can't stand the way things are and sees her as a sworn enemy.

Ten-chan is more talented and has a higher ranking, but only winning will make the pain of loss go away.

"Hmph Keep your stupid candy."

Which is why she sticks up her nose and refuses.

But the rest of us are thrilled!

"Cha, Cha wants cwandy!!"

"Me too, me too! Keika, gimme some!" Mio sounds giddy.

"Sure, sure. Make sure to share them, okay?"

"We will!"

Candy, yay! We divide them up and enjoy≡

Why is candy so much sweeter when you're on a trip than at home?

"..... You're all so childish. The future scares me"

Ten-chan crosses her arms, leans all the way back in her seat, and closes her eyes. I hope she opens up a little bit while we're there.

Everyone's having a good time at the back of the van, but

I join in when I can, but I'm more focused on catching every word of the conversation happening between the front seats and the captains' chairs.

"You actually got the high and mighty Ai Yashajin to be quiet? That's

impressive, Keika! You're a huge help! Sorry for making you drive, too."

"Once I heard that you replaced everyone who's not coming with the girls, I had to come along to make sure everything was alright And, any reason I had for saying *no* went away, too."

"Hm? I didn't catch that last part."

"I said I'm a little nervous because this is my first time driving an eight-seater."

"Oh, I see."

Master has a talent for not hearing the inconvenient things, which is great for competitors. So, of course, he completely misses Keika's offhanded comment. Very convenient! *Darabuchi*

"But it's nice having a big van like this. We can do all sorts of things in here."

"Hah! *All sorts of things* in a black van packed full of little girls? Whatever could you mean by that?"

"H-Hey, Big Sis! Why do you have to make it sound dirty like that?! Wh-What I mean is There's enough room to change in here."

"Yeah right," Sora-sensei snaps.

"..... Um, Keika? Don't you think Big Sis is being overly harsh? I know that almost no one who signed up to go is here, but how's that my fault"

"Hmmm. Nope, that's all your fault, Yaichi."

"Whaaa-?"

Keika can't believe how confused Master is right now.

"My word People went as far as faking sick to give you space, too. Then you go out of your way to invite elementary school girls instead. Ginko has every right to be upset with you."

"Hang on, hang on. I know Big Sis doesn't like kids, and I'm sorry about that. But with the Mynavi Tournament going on and all my practice sessions in Tokyo, my schedule has been full up with Shogi. There hasn't been any time to take them anywhere, right? I've got my title defense to prepare for once summer is over Now's the only chance for them to make some summer memories. How does that make me the bad guy?"

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Who knows? Why don’t you ask Ginko about it once we get to the beach?”

“Wh-What?! She’ll kill me!”

“Pray that it’s quick☆”

I pretend to stare out the window while listening to Master and Keika going back and forth, but actually I keep a close eye on Sora-sensei the whole time Okay, I’m doing a stakeout.

Beaches can be dangerous in summer!



“Okay, everyone. Here’s the swimming spot.”

The van pulls up to one of Awaji Island’s beaches where people can swim.

It’s still too early to check in at the inn, so we park outside and go to the beach first!

Master is the first one out of the car and brags like it’s his personal beach. But he was right about it being more beautiful than I ever imagined.

Mio undoes her seatbelt and dashes right for the water! Charlette and I are right behind her.

“Wooow! The sand, the waves! They’re all so pretty!”

“Da swand, it’s allll white!”

“It sure is, Charlette! The white sand is what makes the water look so clear!”

I never knew there was a beautiful beach like this so close to Osaka!

We were in such a rush to come out here we forgot to put on our swimsuits first. Mio, Charlette and I flick off our sandals and race to the water’s edge.

Whoa! It feels great between my toes♪

“H-Hmph It’s not bad.”

Ten-chan slowly meanders her way over. She's has been acting so uninterested this whole time, like this beach isn't amazing! Reeeeeeally?! Just look at the water!

"Pretty great, isn't it? My seniors back when I was in the Sub League brought me out here. Mr. Kagamizu, too. We've been coming out here to do practice sessions once a year ever since. We'll be staying at the same inn, too."

"Staying at an inn so close to the beach with everyone is a dream come true! We'll make so many lifelong memories!"

"Yep! This is gonna be a blast!"

Ayano agrees with Master. But Mio has a question for me.

"You know, Ai? Your family's hotel is right on the coast, right? Don't you get tired of seeing beaches?"

"..... The Sea of Japan is a bit rougher, I guess. And darker, too"

"O-Oh"

Plus, the swimming areas in Ishikawa Prefecture, like Uchinada and Chirihama, have dark brown sand for the most part, so the water isn't clear like this

"Ah! But, that means the seafood's good! Like the fish, clams, crabs"

All the rough waves make the fish grow up nice and strong, which makes them delicious! That's what my dad told me, and he's a chef!

"Cha, Cha wants shwells!"

Master pats Charlette on the head much longer than he needed and to says, "You want to go find some shells, do you? Wouldn't it be great if there are lots and lots?"

"Wei!"

"What kind do you want to find?"

"Scallwops!"

"S-Scallops? Alright, let's go see"

Master isn't sure what to say, but Ten-chan is a lot blunter.

"There aren't any scallops here, are you kidding?"

“T-Ten-chan?! There could be scallops or abalone shells around. We just have to look!”

“Cha, Cha’s gowing to dig dem up!”

Charlette starts running down the beach, but Master picks her up from behind before she makes it two steps.

“Hold on there, Charlette!”

“Fwhaa?”

“You need to put on sunscreen before you go. Your skin is naturally pale, so you’ll get sunburned right away if you don’t have sunscreen on.”

“Swunbuwnt?”

“Yeah. Your skin will hurt all over if you don’t rub this on.”

Then Master suddenly pulls a tube of cream out of his pocket and shows her.

That’s just like you, Master! Always prepared for anything!

“Umm Cha doewsn’t wike ouwies!”

“Right? That’s what this white cream is for. That way, you won’t get ouwies.”

“..... Oh?”

Charlette looks back and forth between the cream and Master with her big green eyes.

Then, she says.

“Masta, wub wub?”

“Huh?! M- Me?”

“Wei!”

Charlette looks right up at him, pulls up her shirt—and delivers the final blow.



“Masta Wub da cweam all ober Cha?”

Click!!

Master’s switch flipped. I heard it myself. The sound of his lolicon mode turning on

He starts panting, almost gasping for air as he puts a big dab of the white cream onto the palm of his hand, his eyes bloodshot Then he reaches out for Charlette’s smooth skin.

“O-Okay I’ll rub some sunscreen on you, so take off your——.”

“That’s far enough, perv.”

Thwack!! Sora-sensei’s roundhouse kick hits Master squarely in his ribs. Nice one!

Master almost does a flip in the air before landing face first in the sand. Even then, he still tries to get back up. Lolicons are even harder to keep down than the King in the middle of the Shogi board.

“B-But wait, Big Sis. Think of what will happen if Charlette gets sunburned Just think of how perfect it’d be if she had swimsuit tan lines is not what I meant. What I’m saying is, she has delicate skin, so she has to be extra careful”

“Then ask either Keika or I to help her!”

“Ah?! Wh-Why didn’t I think of that?!”

Exactly! Master, you *dara*!!

“Over here, Charlette. Come on back to the van and I’ll put sunscreen on you, okay?” Keika calls to her.

“Fwhaa? Keika will wub it on Cha?”

“I sure will! Hey, girls! You should put some sunscreen on, too! Let me help! Oh, and Yaichi? Carry all of our stuff down to the water, would you?”

Keika rescues our whole practice group from Master who deserves this punishment.

Then Sora-sensei lands another kick right on her younger brother apprentice's behind and says coldly, "You heard her. Get moving, lolicon perv."

"Ngh! I-I didn't do anything"

"Shut up and drop dead, lolicon. Only dead lolicons are allowed to exist."

That's the one thing that I agree with Sora-sensei on. *Doufu!*



"Whew Man, those were heavy That should be everything, right?"

Master gets the last bag out of our black van, drops it down on the plastic sheet we're using as a beach blanket and wipes the sweat off his face.

"Catch your breath later. Put the sunshade umbrella up."

Sora-sensei issues more demands like a cold heartless prison guard without letting Master rest.

"..... You could do that much yourself, Big Sis"

"Do it."

"Alright"

"I have weak skin and I'll die working out in the sun. You know that."

"..... Yes, that's true, but it also wouldn't kill you to show your cuter side every once in a while, " Master mumbles to himself.

Sora-sensei hides her mouth behind the fan and whispers, "..... Says the guy who does anything to make *cute* little girls happy"

"Did you say something, Big Sis?"

"I said, *drop dead, lolicon.*"

"Look, I'm not like that——."

Oh no!

My sensor is going wild. This mood is dangerous! They're fighting, like usual,

but this is the beach in the summer this time! At this rate, it'll take a romantic turn

So I jump between them like a Knight leaping across the board.

"Um Master? Does this swimsuit look good on me?"

Yes, look, look! I went all the way to a department store in Umeda to find exactly the type of swimwear he likes best≡

Since I live with him, of course I know exactly what draws his eyes on TV or in magazines. It's time to show off the results of my research!

"Ahhh! Ai! Don't run off like that!"

Tch

Just when I had the Master's eyes all to myself, the other girls barge in with their own swimsuits on.

"Kujyuru-sensei, what'cha think of mine?! Cute, isn't it?!" Mio says with a big smile.

"Cha, is Cha cute?"

"Th-This style of bathing suit is a little embarrassing, " Ayano mumbles.

"Or so you say, four eyes. Showing off that much skin, really, " Ten-chan scoffs at her.

Mio's got one of those sporty one-piece swimsuits on.

Charlette's is all frilly and oh so cute. Cute as a button.

Ayano I didn't know she was this daring! And the way she's fidgeting and trying to hide it is almost suggestive

As for Ten-chan, hers is more simplistic and stylish. After all she said about not wanting to come, her bringing her own suit is kind of adorable.

Everyone is cute in their own way.

M-Master is going to look at all of them, I just know it!

"Ahhh Hello there, angels≡"

Just what I was afraid of: Master is hypnotized by their swimsuits and won't

stop staring But his eyes stay on Charlette a full six seconds longer than on me. Grrrr

Then Sora-sensei says in a chilly voice right under the summer sun, “Drop dead, lolicon.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not a lolicon! I’m way more interested in Keika’s bikini than anyone else if you haven’t noticed!”

Yay! So much for a romantic turn!

But Master, you won’t be getting dinner when we get home tomorrow night.

“Yaichiii. Thanks for the compliment, really, but you can’t say things like that in front of Ai or Ginko, understood?”

Keika is big. I won’t say what or where, but they’re big.

The only one of us not wearing a swimsuit, Sora-sensei scoffs.

“..... So what? If I had a bikini on, I’d do just as well”

“As flat as you are?”

“Want a pike through your head, Trash?”

“W-Wow! Just look at this weather, it’s beautiful! Perfect for a day at the beach! Oh! Ai, would you help me out for a second?”

“Uwhee? What do you want me to do?”

“I want your help putting suntan lotion on.”

“You want a tan, Master?”

What a surprise!

After all he said about getting sunburned Why?

“Shogi is an indoor sport, right? I don’t get many chances to have a tan. So I thought I’d do the manly thing this summer and go golden brown!”

M-Master, a macho man?!

“I-I’d be happy to help!”

I like Master how he is, kind and everything, but imagining him as a bit of a wild bad boy? So cool!!

A-And I'm on a trip with that bad boy

Haauu haauuuu≡

"Cha, too! Cha wants to wub wub!"

"Y-You have done so much for me over the past few months, Kuzuryu-sensei I would like to repay you and help, as well!"

Since Charlette and Ayano said so, they each take one of Master's legs.

"I won't, ever!! That oily lotion makes my hands feel gross!" Ten-chan refuses right away.

"Ahahahahaha! Look, it's all slippery!"

Mio squirts a whole bunch of it on her body and then rubs it off on Master's back all at once. Great idea!

Alright! Mio showed me how, so I'll do it, too!

"What do you think, Master? Are we using enough oil?"

The Dragon King sounds as happy as can be as the four of us girls lather him up.

"..... I feel like a King with a complete Strawberry Castle"

"Die, perv!!"

Sora-sensei charges in like she's playing beach soccer and drives her foot right into Master's head.

"Owch?! Hey, Big Sis!! My head isn't some soccer ball!"

"M-Master?! Are you okay?!"

That was mean, Auntie! What in the world do you think you're doing?!

"Owww Geez, I keep telling you not to hit me in the head, remember?! What if I get worse at Shogi because you killed too many brain cells, huh?! What then?!"

"You should be more concerned about your reputation than brain cells, perv!!"

"Huuuuh?! I was just having my apprentices put some suntan lotion on me!

How is that perverted?”

“Exactly! This is normal for Masters and apprentices!”

I’m the one who gives Master massages after his bath every now and then!

Sora-sensei takes out her smartphone.

“If it’s so normal, you wouldn’t care if I shot a video and uploaded it to the Internet, would you?”

“Not the web, not the web, please, not the web, anything but the web. This was my bad, all my bad!!”

Master presses his forehead against the hot sand.

Hissss Is that his skin burning? I think I can smell it

“Why? All you were doing was having your apprentices rub you down with suntan oil. There’s nothing dirty about that, is there?”

“Ugh Keika! Big Sis is bullying me

“Let her do what she wants for now. This situation is your fault anyway.”

Once Keika says that to Master, she turns to us.

“Alright, girls! Kuzuryu-sensei will be busy getting roasted here on the beach for a while, so let’s all go for a swim!”

“Coming!”

I’m a little worried about Master, but this is going to take some time. It’s really getting hot out, so I’ll go swim with everyone!

“Awww

“Don’t groan because you’re sad to see them go, you piece of lolicon trash.”

Master watches us with envy as we wade into the water, but Sora-sensei kicks him again. S-Sorry, Master

As the first apprentice, I have to strengthen our bonds for the sake of the Kuzuryu Shogi family in Master’s place!

“Hey! Ten-chan! Come play with us!”

“I told you not to call me that, did I not?!”

Ten-chan ignores my outstretched hand. But she must be a little bit interested in the beach because she follows me like a kitty pretending not to care about a toy. Twiddling her thumbs, she asks me, “..... Play what, exactly?”

“I brought a big beach ball, look! Let’s play beach volleyball!” Mio yells with glee.

This’ll be so much fun!

We start dividing up into teams, but——.

“Nope, I’m going to have to stop you right there.”

Master, still limping from Sora-sensei’s kicks, tells us no. Uwheeee?

“No beach volleyball.”

“Huuuh? Why not?”

“You can’t play Shogi if you stub your fingers, right?”

“Ah, true

Disappointment sets in, but Mio steps up and says, “Then we’ll just play beach soccer!”

“No soccer, either.”

“Whaaaat?!”

But why? You don’t use your hands in soccer

“You can’t sit on your ankles with proper posture if you hurt your feet.”

That’s true, too

Now that I think about it, hurting my foot might be worse! Especially because girls are only allowed to sit in proper *seiza* when we play on *tatami* mats.

“But, then what? What can we play?” I ask Master.

He thinks it over for a moment.

“Hmm

Shogi, maybe?”

“Then why did we come out to the beach at all?!” exclaims Mio with the beach ball in her arms as she looks out over the sand.

Aha-ha

She has a point.

Keika and Ayano calmly talk it over.

“Well, there shouldn’t be any harm in going for swim.”

“And I would like to try building a sand castle.”

Then, Charlette holds up the toy shovel she brought from home and says, “Cha, Cha want to fwind sea shewws!”

She’s going to search for shells on the beach?!

Mio turns back to us with a start and jumps up like she’s got springs in her feet. Slapping Ten-chan on the back, “Alriiighty!! Ten-chan, I’ll race you to the water!”

“What?! Wh-Why do I have to play along with your little race?!”

“The loser buys the winner ice cream! Ready, go!!”

“Agh! W-Wait for me!!”

Ten-chan hates to lose, no matter what it is, and chases Mio as fast as she can.

“I-I’m coming too!” I call out after them. We can all swim together!

Ayano and Charlette are talking behind me.

“Charlette, I’ll relax with you here on the beach.”

“Find sea shewws?”

It sounds like Charlette hasn’t given up on finding scallops. I-I hope she has some luck!

Master and Sora-*sensei* are talking a little further behind them, too.

“It sure looks like they’re having a great time I came here determined to get a tan, but I think I’ll go join them instead.”

“So? Go ahead.”

“Um Big Sis?”

“What?”

“It’s just, I can’t get up with your hand on top of mine like that”

“How is that my problem? And besides, you put your hand under mine.

Changing your mind now, are you?”

“Huh? You’re the one who put your hand on mine, Big Sis, no matter how you look at it

“Are you brain-dead? You’re the one who put your hand beneath mine, perv.”

“..... It doesn’t matter how it got there, would you just please get off my hand?”

“Huuh? Why do I have to move? Figure something out yourself.”

“B-But you’re putting all your weight on it, Big Sis

“Stupid Yaichi.”

“Yeesh What are you trying to do, anyway? Good grief Fine, then. I’ve been going back and forth from Tokyo so much in the past few weeks, I’ll take it slow and just watch the waves today.”

“..... That’s better.”

Darabuchi

Well, Sora-sensei does have very sensitive skin, so maybe she can’t play on the beach even with plenty of sunscreen. I feel a little sorry for her, so I’ll lend Master to her for now.

But just while I’m swimming, okay?

“Everyone, don’t go too far out, understand?” Keika calls out to us with her big boobies almost spilling out.

Darabuchi

“Whoa! How do you swim so fast, Ai?!”

“Come on, Mio, Ten-chan! Keep up!”

“I’ve already told you plenty of times: STOP CALLING ME THAT!”

I grew up on the coast, so I love swimming in the ocean! There’s a trick to swimming with the waves that you can’t learn in a pool, so Mio and Ten-chan keep getting pulled back.

Meanwhile on the beach, Charlette and Ayano——.

“Cha, Cha’s got swand in her bwathing suit. Itchwy.”

“Ch-Charlette!! You mustn’t take it off here!!”

Ayano jumps up to stop Charlette from trying to get the sand out of her swimsuit.

Yes, that’s exactly right!

There’s no telling where perverts might be hiding, so swimming suits must stay on at all times! The beach during the summer is really dangerous!

For example Right there.

The pervert watching from the plastic sheet——.

“..... Grade schoolers are the best.”

Turns out to be Master.

“Drop dead, Trash!!”

And Sora-sensei lands a powerful dropkick. What a relief!

“Ouch! Wh-What was that for, Big Sis?!”

“Don’t fess up with that smirk on your face! Trash! Perv! Loli-King!”

“Look, I was just commenting on how grade schoolers can adapt and have fun with each other! It’s kind of nice, that’s all!!”

“Shut up, lolicon.”

“I’m not, okay?! I was just thinking how pure and innocent they are playing on this beautiful beach——.”

“Lolicon

“..... Sorry.”

Since Master is tied to the shore until the sun goes down, the rest of us forget all about Shogi and have a great time on the beach.



Once we had enough swimming and playing in the sand, we packed up and

drove to where we're staying tonight.

Master comes here every year, so the owner of the inn is very friendly!

After a nice bath, we sit down for a big dinner. I'm starving, so I eat and eat and eat until there's no room left.

"Ahhh, I'm so full!"

I pat my round tummy through my *yukata* robe and Mio lays down on the *tatami* mat. Charlette does the same thing, landing right on top of her.

"Ooph!" goes Mio.

I know it's bad manners, but I want to lay down, too.

"All of those dishes were delicious!"

Just as Ayano said, everything the inn served was better than we thought it would be.

Even as the daughter of a family-run inn, I have to give it a perfect score.

It didn't have the same detailed textures as the food dad makes, but they brought out all the natural flavors extremely well. And the famous Awaji Island-grown onions are surprisingly sweet!

I grimace a little bit as I pour tea for everyone.

"My skin stung a little in the bath, though."

"That's because you were outside for too long So, when are we going to play Shogi? The half pint has called it a night already and the old hag looks like she's drunk."

Ten-chan is right. Charlette is using Mio's tummy like a pillow and can't keep her eyes open.

"Fahha Cha Cha's weawwy sweepy"

"Sssorry? I helped myself to a beer♪"

"Ehehe≡," the older younger sister apprentice laughs with a silver can in her hand. We girls of the Kiyotaki line hold our heads in shame while the eldest brother grimaces just looking at her.

"Keika"

“..... Hey, what could it hurt? It’s summer vacation”

Ten-chan shakes her head back and forth, mouthing “my word,” before letting Master have it.

“*Sigh* Well, *Sensei*. Wasn’t this supposed to be an overnight Shogi practice session? I fail to understand why we bothered coming out here at all.”

“Easy there. We’ve got all morning to play Shogi, so we’ll get up early and”

I’m really tired tonight, so I’m with Master on this one! But I wonder if I’ll be able to get up in the morning.

Then again, it seems like I’ve got nothing to worry about.

Because———this trip’s main event is just about to start.

“Alright, everyone. Let’s hit the sack now so we can be ready for tomorrow,” says Master, clapping his hands.

“Cha, Cha wants ta sweep wid Masta in his futown”

Wiping her eyes, Charlette gets up from lying on Mio and steps on her to get closer to Master.

“Ouph!” Mio grunts. Ahaha! She sounds like a frog!

Hey! Wait, wait!!

“Sleep with me in my futon?! N-N-No, Charlette! That’s a no-no!”

“Why? Cha, Cha is Masta’s bwide.”

Charlette is Master’s bride.

“Huh? Bride What are you talking about, tot?”

The first to say anything is Sora-*sensei*.

She had been quietly sipping her tea, but she couldn’t let Charlette’s

comment pass, as no dual Woman's title holder would.

"Listen, Big Sis! What she's saying is——."

"Charlette took Master's promise *to make her his bride* seriously. Those were Master's exact words. Mio and Ayano can confirm it right here. Isn't that right?" I cut off Master to say.

"W-Well, uh"

"I-If you asked if I heard him say it Yes, I heard"

The two of them can't say much, but both Mio and Ayano agree with me. The tables have turned.

With all of us vouching for the same story, Sora-sensei turns to her younger brother apprentice and quietly says his name. "Yaichi."

"Y-Yesh"

"You are about to embark on a long, long journey. Is there anything you would like to do while you still have the chance? I think this'll be an extremely long summer vacation for you."

"Wh-What do you mean by that"

"I'm taking you on a long trip to prison."

"You mean you're turning me in?! Keika, save me! Big Sis wants to turn me over to the police!"

"Yaichi I'll be sure to bring your favorite *Habutae-mochi* rice cakes during visitation hours"

"Don't give up so soon, Keika! Please, don't give up!"

Master loves those rice cakes from Fukui Prefecture, but it will be difficult to enjoy them behind bars, won't it?

Well, Master is underage, so maybe it'll be juvenile hall?

"Oh no! Master is going to be locked in a cage! Then again, I won't have to worry about him getting too close to other girls. Maybe it's better this way?"

"Don't say scary things like that, Ai!!"

It's because of your bad behavior, Master.

“Ooooh, I got it!!”

Keika, still holding that beer can in her hand, jumps to her feet——.

“It’s time for Keika’s lolicon litmus test!”

She yells.

“..... Huh?”

The room goes quiet.

It takes everyone a moment to process the meaning of those words But Charlette couldn’t figure it out and tilts her head, confused.

“Woweekon whitmas twest?”

“No, no. Lolicon litmus test.”

Mio corrects her and Charlette tries again.

“Wowiikan weetas vest?”

“Try again, lo-li-con lit-mus test.”

“Wowi we?”

“Li! Lit-mus t-e-s-t!”

“Wimus twist?”

“Yeah, that’s good enough!”

“Wimus≡”

No fair. Too cute.

“Ahhh Such an angel.”

“Tch.”

Smack! Sora-sensei whacks Master on the back of his head with the slipper off her own foot.

“Ouch! What was that for?! I didn’t do anything!!”

“You’re gross!”

Doufu.

Wait! More importantly——.

“Um Keika? What is a lolicon litmus test?”

“It’s my way of seeing just how much of a lolicon Yaichi is☆”

I’ve never seen Keika this giddy before. Even Sora-*sensei* looks worried.

“..... Keika, are you drunk?”

“Drunk? Ohhh, nope, nope! Nooooot at all!”

She’s very drunk.

“Plastered, that’s what you are,” Ten-chan says with a groan and puts a bag of Shogi pieces back into her travel pack. Sorry, you wanted to play Shogi, didn’t you?

But I don’t think tonight’s the night for it!

“So, Keika? How does the test work?”

“Great question! You see, all of us girls here are going to ask Yaichi out on a date!”

She must not have been expecting that, because Sora-*sensei* screams.

“WHAAAAAAT?! A-Ask out o-on a d- HUUUUUH?!”

Next, it’s Ten-chan’s turn. She stands straight up with the piece bag still clutched in her hand.

“Wh-Why must *I* say such a thing to this piece of trash?!”

“Ten-chan, I am your Master, remember?”

Master looks at her with a twinge of sadness in his eyes. He may be used to Sora-*sensei* tearing him to shreds, but it looks like his own apprentice rejecting him really hurts.

Hmm Actually, that reaction makes me feel

“Pretend: it’s just pretend. But we get to see just how much Yaichi blushes when each one of us asks him!”

Thump! Mio puts her hands together. She must’ve just gotten it.

“I see! If he turns bright red when you ask him out, Keika, he’s not lolicon at all! But if he blushes his brains out when Charlette asks, he’s a heavy-duty lolicon! Right?!”

“Th-That’s a revolutionary idea!” Ayano agrees.

Now that I think about it This might be great!!

“Revolutionary? That’s way over the top! And Keika, get a hold of yourself! No guy wants to be *pretend* asked out! Are you trying to make me sad or something?!”

It seems that Keika was expecting this kind of resistance. She glances over at Sora-sensei with a mischievous grin.

“Of course, no one said it couldn’t be an honest invitation.”

“Why are you looking at me? I won’t be part of this!”

“Hehehe How long can you resist, Miss Snow White of Naniwa?”

“Keika Th-That’s the kind of thing an orc would say right before ravaging a captive lady knight!”

Master I have a problem with your metaphor. I’m still in elementary school, so I’m not entirely sure what it means, but

“Now! Who’s going to be our top batter?!”

Keika claps her hands together as she looks at all of us one by one until——.

“Me! Meee! I wanna try!”

“Excellent! Go ahead and introduce yourself!”

“I’m Mio Mizukoshi! Nine years old! I came here from Osaka today!”

“That’s some great energy, you little go-getter! Now, hit Yaichi with your best shot!”

Keika has Yaichi stand at the front of the room and then pulls Mio up to him. Then she presses a few buttons on her smartphone With the can still in her other hand. Wow, she has good dexterity

Music starts playing from her phone.

“Huh?! Wh-What’s that for?! Setting the mood?!!”

Master is trembling.

And now Mio looks a little nervous!

Th-This flow is dangerous!

“Uh Umm Kujiyuryu-*senseei*?”

“Y-Yeah?”

“I-I think you’re really cool! Go out with me!!”

“Huh? Oh, um Sorry.”

Rejected without a second of waiting time. Whew

“Whaaa-?! Why?!”

“It’s just, well I know you tried really hard, Mio. And I do feel bad if I hurt your feelings, but I don’t see grade schoolers as dating material. And your acting needs work

“Huh? Boys are so hard to understand

I can tell Mio is frustrated by how she mumbles under her breath. But I think anyone would turn her down if she asked them out like that

“..... I wouldn’t be having such a hard time if it were that easy

“Ai? Did you say something just now?”

“Uwhee?! N-Nope! I didn’t say a thing!!”

I’ve gotta be more careful! My thoughts must’ve come out!

But Ehehe≡

Master said *sorry* to Mio right away. I can breathe a little easier! Sorry, Mio.

But Keika’s next words almost make my heart stop.

“Okay. Mio, go ahead and choose who goes next.”

“Oh, that’s how this works?”

Sora-*sensei* and Ten-chan groan as soon as they hear that.

“That’s alarming

“Like handing the controls of a nuclear missile over to a monkey

Mio's eye twitches, and she looks over at Ten-chan.

"Well, someone sure talks a big game. Come on up, Ten-chan!"

"Huuuh?!"

"Show this monkey how it's done. Ou-ahah!"

"M-Monkey see, monkey do won't work! Don't you understand that?! It'd be pointless! Absolutely pointless!"

Ten-chan tries to talk her way out of it while Mio does a monkey impression, but

Mio gets an idea and her eyes light up.

"Ohhh? So, you're gonna run away?"

"What?! Just who do you think you're talking to? I won't run away from anything! Fine, I'll do it!"

"And now, for entry number two! It's Ai Yashajin's turn to ask Yaichi out! The floor is yours♪"

Keika does a quick introduction and then pushes her up to the front.

The music starts again.

Ten-chan fixes the collar on her *yukata* and then leans forward just a little bit in front of Master.

She must be too embarrassed to look right at him.

But that angle From that angle she looks the cutest! No fair!!

"Um *Sensei*?"

"Y-Yeah?"

"L-Let me make this clear right now Everything I'm about to say is not true, understood?! Don't get the wrong idea, Trash!"

"O- Okay."

Mio and Keika start whispering to each other.

"Is it just me, or is she interrogating him?"

"Awe, she's being shy. She's cute when she's angry."

Ugh

Actually, the way Ten-chan gets so icy when we know she's embarrassed is very cute.

Kind of like the way a stray kitten suddenly opens its heart to you

No fair! That's not fair at all, Ten-chan!

"..... So, I-I I'm not exactly social, and I really, really don't like it when people make me learn things"

Ten-chan's skin looks a lot redder than usual.

But it's not because we spent all afternoon out in the sun——.

"But I know I have to change that about myself ... not only for the sake of my grandfather's ease--he is my only family after all--but for my own sake I must acknowledge my feelings and accept other people's advice ..."

Acknowledge her feelings——.

Ten-chan is always so closed off, just as she said. But right now I can tell how desperate but annoyed she is trying to find the right words.

Wow If anyone gave me that look, I'd get butterflies!

"S-So *Sensei*? I want you to teach me not just about Shogi, but so many other things b-because, I want to be an adult as soon as possible"

What a bold move Ten-chan just played! What are those *other things*?! Even my butterflies are getting butterflies!

Master took that head-on, and he——.

"I see"

"Yes, " Ten-chan's eyes sparkle as she waits for his answer.

Master looks right at her and says, "And? What are you really after?"

"..... HUUUUH?!"

"You trying to act admirable isn't cute so much as suspicious"

"Excuse me?!"

Ten-chan is furious! Meanwhile, Mio is rolling on the *tatami* mats and clutching her ribs with laughter.

“Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Th-That was awesome, Ten-chan! He sure trusts you, doesn’t he?!!”

“M-Mio You shouldn’t laugh”

“Or so you say, but I see that grin, Ai!”

“I-I’m not! Really!”

Really, I’m not Ehe-he he-he-he≡

Ten-chan is angry through and through, so Keika says, “Moving on, who’s the next one?”

“Hmm Four eyes.”

“A-Are you talking about me?!”

Ayano nearly falls over.

Ten-chan flicks her hair like she’s annoyed and says, “Who else? Now do it.”

“Umm Ohh, my my”

Ayano is close to panicking and tries taking off her trademark glasses to get out of it, but

Of course, that won’t work. Mio pokes her right in the ribs.

“Nope, nope! Ayanon, it’s too late even without your glasses on.”

“Haauuu”

Master can’t help but offer her a way out.

“A-Ayano? If you really don’t want to, there’s no need to force yourself. I don’t get what the point of all this is anyway”

“N-No! I-It’s not because I don’t want to”

Sparkle☆ Keika’s eyes light up as she taps on her phone.

The music starts back up again.

This timing is too perfect!

Ayano starts her attack before Master's heart is safely behind a defensive wall!

"I-I've never been good at talking with boys Not even the boys in my class. But I have fun talking with you like this, Kuzuryu-sensei. I-I don't understand why"

It's almost like she's naturally working her way to a date checkmate!

It's hard to tell what's an act and what her actual feelings are, like seeing a perfect early game without a single wasted move!

"What I'm trying to say is, um I-I like you *Sensei*"

Clench!

"Hghh!!"

Master falls to his knees like someone just shot him in the heart with a pistol. Then——.

"Ah! Look He's turning bright red!"

"Masta, yewr face is bewwy wed."

Ten-chan and Charlette are right Master is turning redder by the second! It's like a science experiment!

Dara! Master, you *darabuchi!* Cheater!!

"But how are we supposed to compare this with everyone else's?"

"Not to worry, Mio. I took pictures at the exact moment Yaichi heard what all of you said, so we can compare later."

"Wow! You're really on the ball today, Keika!"

"Well, I don't think anyone needs to look at the pictures to know Ayano is in the lead right now."

"Haauuu I-I'm so embarrassed, I want to die"

Ayano, red as a tomato, hides her face with both hands. Master is watching her, a lot happier that he's trying to let on.

Hmph.

Hm? Hmrph.

“Hmm. So that’s the way Master likes it. Hmmm

“Yes. Yaichi has always liked the smart girls that open up with that *girly!* act going way back.”

This is the first time Sora-sensei and I have agreed on something.

That’s right.

Master plays passive Shogi, but whenever someone comes along who shows him exactly where to attack, he makes his move! Rapid Attack!!

And, since Ayano is the kind of girl who hides in a Mino Castle without the edge pawn raised, the type who *looks well protected but will get checkmated in a flash*

“Hold up, hold up! Ai, Big Sis, what are you two talking about?! Her asking me out is nothing compared to how much effort it took for her to come up here and say it! I’m just so happy she tried so hard——.”

“That you got excited?”

“I’m not, not at all!”

Master responds to Sora-sensei’s severe move with anger of his own.

Keika takes in the situation, and then takes in some more beer.

“There we go! Now this is getting interesting! Can Yaichi save himself from being labeled a lolicon?! Or will all the suspicions be confirmed?! Alright, Ayano, who’s next?!”

“O-Okay, um Sora-sensei.”

Th-The moment of truth!!

“..... Sure.”

“Huh?! Just like that,” Master mumbles in disbelief. He must’ve thought she’d refuse.

Sora-sensei straightens her bangs before answering with this.

“It’s just a game, right? Yaichi isn’t all that complicated, so making him blush is like taking candy from a baby. And I know him better than anyone else.”

Sora-sensei just has to take the *I'm number one* angle. That's unfair.

"..... *Darabuchi*."

"Hm?"

"C'mon, Ginko. The stage has been set for you. Go deliver your line."

Keika giggles before sticking her tongue out☆ with a big grin. Meanwhile Charlette tugs at Ayano's *yukata* collar.

"Set da stwage?"

"It means that every detail has been taken care of by someone else because the person in question won't do anything by themselves."

"You've got a surprisingly sharp tongue, four eyes"

Ten-chan leans away just a little bit after Ayano's blunt explanation.

More importantly! Sora-sensei looks extremely confident They spent a lot of time alone on the beach this afternoon. Don't tell me the air turned romantic?

I knew I shouldn't have left them alone! That idiot! *Darabuchi*!!

Sora-sensei stands in front of Master, and—opens up.

"Hm Yaichi."

"Yes?"

"Y-You're allowed to love me, you know?"

"....."

"....."

"....."

"....."

"Hey."

"Ouch!!"

Thwap! Auntie hits Master's forehead with her slipper.

Huh? W-Wasn't she going to confess her feelings to get him to go out with

her?

Girls my age can do way better than that

“Why aren’t you blushing?!”

“I can’t do the impossible! How was what you just said supposed to make me blush?!”

Well, he does have a big red mark on his face in the shape of a slipper and keeps mumbling, “Oww” really quietly. But, Master counters.

“..... Besides, saying I’m *allowed* to love you? I have for years, so how would that change anything?”

“Huh?”

Sora-sensei’s face goes blank.

What? Whaaaaat?!

“Ah! Look look at Sora-sensei’s face!”

“Bright red! And it’s getting redder and redder every second!”

“It turns out someone else *isn’t too complicated* Pathetic.”

Mio and Ayano’s voices race back and forth. Ten-chan shrugs her shoulders, and Keika takes even more pictures with her phone.

But, not of Master. Of Sora-sensei

“Y-You do? Master, what do you see in Auntie?” I managed to say while keeping the tears back.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! I didn’t mean it like *that*! We’re family, so we love each other! Isn’t that right, Big Sis?!”

“O-Of course. Would you not get the wrong idea, please?”

You’re the one who *got the wrong idea*, Auntie!!

“Ginko.”

“Wh-What, Keika?”

“That sucked.”

“Ngh!”

Hit where it hurts most, *Sora-sensei* trembles as she tries to deal with the fact that she lost.

“L-Like you could do any better!”

“Just watch.”

I think Keika was expecting something like this to happen.

She nods with a big smile and puts her phone and the beer can down on the floor.

Swish She takes the band out of her hair and it flows over her shoulder.

“Ah! Keika let her hair down!”

“S-So, this is what adult charms look like!”

Mio and Ayano are girls, but Keika is making their faces turn red, too. All that beer has given her skin a captivating glow

She must have set the phone to play music before she put it down, because now it’s playing smooth jazz.

“Say Yaichi? I’m too hot”

“Huuuh?!”

“Much much too hot I’ll burn up if I don’t cool off, so, may I?”

She undoes the string keeping her robe together and leans right into Master Keika is being touchy-feely.

That’s against the rules! Not allowed!!

“H-Hold up, Keika!! Y-You can’t do that! Th-There are kids watching!!”

..... Does that mean you think it’d be okay if we weren’t here?

“Sorry for being so hard on you this afternoon. I wanted to treat you to a wonderful time, but My scaaary older sister apprentice wouldn’t let me get close.”

“Mnrgh!”

Sora-sensei is grinding her teeth.

“Ngh Nrghhhhh!”

And, I'm biting my lip. Grrrgh

"Oh, and look, the little kittens who don't know how to please you are so jealous."

Keika slips her arm around Master's neck like a cougar going in for the kill.

"So tell me, Yaichi. Have you kissed Ginko yet?"

"Wh-What are you even talking about, Keika?! I wouldn't kiss her, no way!"

"Then, no? I see"

She presses those melon-sized boobies of hers right up against Master
And opens up in her own way.

"Well then, as the experienced one, let me teach your untouched lips how it's done, Yaic——."

But she never got to finish that sentence.

BONK!

Dull thuds echo off the walls.

They're the sounds of Keika being hit in the back of the head with glass bottles.

"..... Huh? K-Keika?"

Master watches in surprise as Keika hits the floor like a marionette that had all its strings snapped at once.

The ones who saved him from being defiled by that touchy-feely cougar are——.

"Ah Big Sis?! Ai?! Hitting her with those bottles was going too far!! Look at her, sprawled out on the floor like that!"

"..... This wasn't for you, Yaichi. It was to protect Keika's dignity"

"That's right. We had to save our family line's image. There was no other choice"

It It was the only option

"You know, Ayano? Suddenly, I'm really really glad I'm not in the Kiyotaki

Shogi family

“S-So strict

Mio and Ayano are trembling in the corner of the room. Even Ten-chan is whispering, “Maybe I should look into finding a new Master after all

Master makes sure that Keika, out like a light, is breathing and says, “A- Are you all happy now? More people are just going to get hurt if we keep going, so let’s get ready for b——.”

“Not yet.”

“Huh? A-Ai? Why——?”

“I haven’t had my turn.”

Ten-chan sounds a bit fed up when she adds, “Seriously? You want to keep going after that?”

“But, I have something I want to say to Master! Master!!”

“Y-Yes?!”

Master snaps to attention. Huh? Why is he so scared?

“U-Um, Ai? Before you say anything, I think it would be best if you put the bottle down.”

“Oh I forgot.”

Following Ayano’s advice, I put it down on the *tatami* mat and then turn back to Master.

“Ummm I’m Ai Hinatsuru, a fourth grader. Master, there’s something I want to say

First, I reintroduce myself.

Since Keika shows no signs of waking up, Mio picks up her phone. “It’s this button here, right?” she says. Then music starts again. Nice!

“I I’ve always been very shy I didn’t know how to speak up, so I always did just what my parents said like a robot

Ten-chan and Sora-sensei mumble.

“That’s an obvious lie.”

“No doubt. She’s just copying the approaches that worked.”

Two new names get written on my mental *Beyond Forgiveness List* right then.
I’ll kill them both on the board ... someday

But! Now’s not the time to worry about what two losers have to say.

I have to open up about how he helped me change from a shy little robot into someone new!

Say how he inspired me and use it to ask him out on a date——.

“I haven’t felt like my usual self. Not since I started playing Shogi not since you became my Master.”

“Ai

“Playing Shogi has shown me what kind of person I want to be. Having you with me, Master, gives me the courage to change.”

I’ve got him on his heels! Now’s my chance!

“Shogi is so hard, and there are so many people who are really strong I feel like giving up whenever I lose, but

When I lost to Sora-sensei.

When I lost to Ten-chan, too.

It hurt so bad that I cried and cried, but

“But! Seeing you try so hard all the time, Master, gave me the courage to keep trying! I can change because I have Shogi! I can keep playing because I have you! So

The first thing that Master ever gave to me.

It’s a fan that has the word *courage* written on it in his letters.

I keep it close to my heart to keep the fear away.

I——play the best move, confess my feelings and ask him to be mine!

“I I never! ever! ever! want to leave your side, Master!!”

“.....”

My attack hits home, right down the center file.

Master then——.

“Ugh Ngh *Sniffle*!”

What?

“Uwhee?! M-Master?! Why are you crying?!”

“I-I’m so so sorry! I-If only I I’d been a better teacher, you’d be so much stronger already S-Sorry you wound up with such a useless Master like me, really!!”

What?! Whaaat?

He can cry tears of joy, that’s fine, but *Not* what I had in mind!

Even Ten-chan and Sora-*sensei* can’t believe how hard he’s crying!

“Yeesh Here come the waterworks”

“Like a father at his daughter’s wedding, just wow”

Huuuh?!

This wasn’t supposed to happen!

“Y-You have my word! I’ll work harder I promise!!” Master says in tears as he kneels in front of me and puts his hand on my shoulder. I mean, I’m happy to hear that, but Haauuu

Ayano holds her glasses in one hand as she wipes away her tears on her *yukata* sleeve.

“Ai You are so loved. I’m envious”

“Haauuu It’s nice to know, but I’m not sure how I feel about this”

“..... So? Do we have an answer or not?”

Ten-chan asks and Mio answers in place of Keika, who is still lying on the floor.

“Hmmm, well, he turned bright red for Ayano and Keika, so we can’t say he’s not lolicon for sure, but He really seemed to like Keika’s invitation, so

maybe he's just a normal guy?"

Master wipes his runny nose and says, "..... O-Of course I'm normal. That's what I've been trying to tell you. I'm not a lolicon."

"I-I agree. Kuzuryu-sensei is a gentleman Even if he is a lolicon deep down, he is a gentleman among them!"

That would still mean he's one of *them*, right?

"Well, yes! While we were at the beach today and while we were taking turns asking him out just now, Master's eyes were always glued to Keika's boobs."

"Hm? Ai, are you angry right now?"

Angry? Yes. Fuming? Very much so.

"Sigh This was all a big waste of time. I'm going to sleep."

Sora-sensei grabs Keika by the collar and drags her all the way to her futon, but she still doesn't wake up.

Meanwhile, Ayano picks up Charlette and says, "Come now, Charlette. Brush your teeth before bed."

"..... Cha Cha not fwinished"

Charlette says as she rubs her eyes and gets down.

Then, she crawls her way over to Master and—

"Hm? Is something wrong, Charlette?"

"Masta. Wisten cwose?"

"Listen? Okay."

"Cha, Cha Masta?"

Charlette's lips are so close to Master's ear that they're almost touching.

Then, she whispers these words.

"..... Cha lubs yew≡"

— Charlette ... loves ... Master.

What do you think happened to Master after hearing that pure as snow, sweet as whipped cream confession of love?

His switch flipped. What else?

His face turns so much redder than with Ayano *Boom!* It sounds like a cannon just went off.

“Char-!”

Next thing I know, Master has his arms around her and announces for everyone to hear, “I promise to make you the happiest girl on earth!!”

“Yippie≡”

So much for going out on a date. Master jumped all the way to marrying her.

I won’t allow it! Of course, I’ll never allow that to happen!!

Sora-sensei is just as upset as I am! She’s furious!!

“H-Hey, Yaichi!! What are you doing, embracing the six-year-old?!”

“She’s right, Master! We all just agreed that you aren’t a lolicon, and the first thing you do is——?!”

“So what if I am?!” Master snaps back with Charlette still in his arms.

Sora-sensei trembles for just a moment before returning fire.

“Y-You’re admitting it, are you?!”

“NO! I may act like it sometimes, but I am NOT a lolicon!”

“You can’t have it both ways,” says Ten-chan coolly, but Master isn’t listening to anyone else. He’s not looking at anyone other than Charlette, either.

Dara

Dara, dara, dara, dara

Daradaradaradaradaradaradaradaradaradara **DARABUCHI!!**

“We’ve learned something today on this trip Here on the beautiful Awaji Island and all across this vast world we live on!” says Master, trying to sound profound.

“Umm This music, maybe?”

“Mio. You don’t have to play anything for this

It’s strange

Even the weirdest things when said with the right music in the background can sound like an epiphany Bizarre

“Yes, we have learned that no matter how much you clash with someone else, if only you open your mind just like that glimmering ocean out there And have the courage to say what’s in your heart, they’ll understand and all misconceptions will be resolved!”

Misconceptions?

Hmm, I wonder?

There are going to be misconceptions no matter what he says so long as Master keeps holding Charlette like that.

“I’m being berated by society for simply offering to make Charlette my bride

“As should be expected.”

“You’d be executed in America for this.”

“However!!”

Master drowns out Ten-chan and Sora-sensei’s valid points by shouting over them.

“I didn’t make the offer because she’s six years old! The person I want to treasure just happens to coincidentally be six years old!!”

Then Master looks into the ice-cold stares boring holes into him and yells.

“Therefore, I AM NOT A LOLICON! It only looks that way to you and to the rest of society because you’re blinded by a number called *age*! You don’t see the genuine love! Open your hearts and minds, just like the ocean! Well?! If you still think I’m a lolicon now, say it to my face!!”

“LOLICON!!”

“..... But why

Do you have to ask?! Master, you *dara*!!

*This story is a novelized version of the Drama CD included with the special release version of “*The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done! Book 4.*”

BLACK CAT'S FAREWELL:
THE LAST GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 2



BLACK CAT'S FAREWELL: THE LAST GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 2



Mio says earnestly while we wait for a decision on the camellia oil, “That night was really bad.”

“Yes. The worst.” I answer her using no time. In fact, I respond before she finishes.

“Fwhee? Cha, Cha had wots of fun?”

“I’m sure you did, Charlette If Master treated me the same way he treated you, it would have been the best trip ever *Darabuchi*”

“A-Ai! You mustn’t make that face in the airport! Someone might mistake you for a dangerous person!”

“Ah! S-Sorry”

“Nice one, Ayano! Ai’s really scary when that killer instinct kicks in. I mean, even Mihane in our class had an accident when she saw it!”

Mio is exaggerating things, but I know I’m a little more competitive than most kids my age. I know that part of me exists.

I’ve got these Shogi boards in my head, and they start moving on their own once something triggers them. When they do, there’s nothing I can do to stop them

I take Ayano’s hand and thank her.

“Thanks, Ayano! You took a big step that night and got Master to like you”

“Now I’m in the line of fire?!”

Since the clerk comes back to the counter at that very moment, my friendship with Ayano manages to survive by a thread.

“Miss Mizukoshi. I apologize for the wait.”

“Oh, it’s alright. So What did they say?”

“I’m afraid that we cannot allow this oil to be taken onto the plane. You can either take it home or we’ll dispose of it.”

“Oh Now what?”

How is she supposed to *take it home* when she’s about to get on a plane?

“Mio, if you’d like, I can take it back with me. Grandpa-*sensei* might figure out a way to ship it to you.”

“Ai Thanks! That’d be amazing! Even if there’s no way, Kiyotaki-*sensei* can use it in his classroom! That way it won’t go to waste!”

There aren’t any other problems, so the clerk takes Mio’s suitcase and gives her a boarding pass.

“You really saved me back there, Ai. Man, am I glad I’ve got you here! Otherwise, I might’ve ended up stuck in Japan.”

“Y-You’re just saying that. I’m sure you would’ve been fine without me”

Ayano can look up anything if you ask her, and I’m pretty sure Mio has enough determination to figure things out on her own.

“Now, all that’s left for me to do is the one thing that’ll let me leave Japan with no regrets!”

“The *one thing*?”

My heart skips a beat.

The last thing Mio wants to do in Japan. The most important thing to her.

Could it be one more Shogi match?

The first person I ever played a real match with was Master.

The day after that, he took me to the Kansai Shogi Association where I played Shogi with a girl my own age for the first time.

That girl—was Mio Mizukoshi.

I lost to Master despite having the handicap, but I beat Mio in an even match And that match showed me just how interesting Shogi is, gave me a boost of confidence and helped me make an important friend all at the same time.

So, I thought just maybe Mio wanted the last person she plays Shogi with in Japan to be me.

Back when she said she'd give me a present, when she said she didn't have a *thing* for me, I was sure she was going to say, "Let's play Shogi!" I think I was hoping she would, just a little bit.

Well, all her boards and pieces are behind the counter now.

Even still If she asked me to, I——.

"On my last day here in Japan, I want to"

"Yes"?

Mio puts her hands on her tummy and opens her mouth wide.

"Eat 'til I burst!!"

Aha-ha That's just like her.

"Whoa! Look at that! There's a TSUTAYA bookstore at the airport!!"

Once we take the elevator to where the domestic flights leave on the second floor, Mio happily squeals with her eyes open wide.

"There's a convenience store, an ATM and is that a prayer house?! They've got everything here"

"There's a souvenir shop located over there, that's the *Machiya Kouji* food court with all those good places to eat. Starbucks, Sukiya, 551 They've got all your favorites, Mio!"

"Fwhee! So many showps!"

I point to the sign that shows all the shops and restaurants on the third floor.

"Everyone, look! There's even more on the next floor!!"

"Let's go, let's go! I wanna see!!"

Mio cuts in front of us and jumps on the escalator.

"Wow! The second floor was pretty much a food court, but up here's like a fancy shopping mall!"

Mio can't contain her excitement looking at the restaurants that are built right into the walls.

But what gets me even more excited than that is——.

“Whoooa!! There's a drugstore, a 100-yen shop and even a Uniqlo! Lots of Master's shirts are getting old, so maybe I'll get some new ones for him.”

Maybe he'll compliment me for having everything nice and ready for him when he comes back from Tokyo Ehe-he≡

Just when I'm starting to imagine it, Mio says with a forced smile, “Kujyuryu-*sensei* is all you think about, isn't he? Wait, haven't you been here before, Ai?”

“We thought we'd lost our passports last time, so there was a big rush We got here at the very last minute, so we had to go right to security”

Japanese food is easy to find in Hawaii, and we were only there for a few days for the Ryuo Title Match, so we didn't need to have any before takeoff.

But who knows when Mio will be back in Japan.

Her mother will be with her over there, but there's no telling if they can get the right ingredients

“Let's see, there are udon and soba noodle places. Sushi, *tonkatsu* pork, pasta, Chinese, Italian, too. That place looks like a café Plenty of people probably want their last taste of Japan before they leave. We're all thinking the same thing. Actually, I already miss those box lunches they give us when the Practice League meets.”

“Missing how the soy sauce is just a little too strong You must really like Japanese flavors,” Ayano mumbles with a shudder. Those lunches really dry out your throat, so a water bottle is a must in the Kansai Practice League. Many people don't finish their lunches, either.

“So, tell me! If you were about to leave Japan, what would you want to eat last?”

“What about ramen? Your favorite restaurant, Doutonbori Kamakura, is on this floor, Mio.”

“They’ve got the best *karaage* fried chicken, don’t they?! What about you, Ai?”

“I think I’d want sushi. That’s usually what I have for lunch during matches.”

Japanese food is the king of Shogi lunches because it’s light and easy to eat. Master used to order it for us all the time during our practice sessions.

“Ramen or sushi, hmm. Both are classics! What about you, Charlette?”

“Umm Ebewyting!!” says Charlette, her face pressed up against a glass display case. Then, she looks left and right before stumbling her way to the next restaurant like a little blonde bumblebee.

I go corral her and ask, “Charlette. What’s something here that you can’t eat in Europe?”

“Umm? Cha, Cha want dem aww?”

“Th-That’s not what I meant”

Looks like this girl is so hungry that words won’t get through to her

“Mio. What place would you like to go?”

“He! He! He! Actually I know exactly where I want to go! I’ve been planning this meal for two whole weeks!”

That long?!

“Miow? Wha yew wanna eat?”

“Glad you asked Chinese!!”

“Chinese food? For your last meal in Japan?” Ayano asks, clearly shocked that Mio would go to a regular Chinese chain restaurant rather than a place that specializes in ramen.

Mio then says, “C’mon, the Chinese food here is basically Japanese food, anyway! And we can order a lunch and share at a Chinese place. That one right there has lots of tables open, so I’d like to spend my last few hours here having lunch with everybody! That’s my answer!”

“Ohhh!!”

I guess she did spend lots of time thinking about it because it’s the perfect

choice!

“Alright, let’s go order a big lunch! Huh? What’s wrong, Mio? Aren’t you coming?”

Mio starts fidgeting out of the blue.

Just when I think she’s lost her wallet——.

“Actually I need to run to the toilet! Sorry, really!! I-I’ve been holding it since the check-in counter, but now that everything’s okay, I guess I”

“There’s no need to apologize! You should’ve said something sooner Would you like me to look after your overstuffed backpack?” offers Ayano.

“No thanks, I got it! I might be a while, so go ahead and order anything!”

Mio zooms away to find the closest restroom.

So the three of us walk inside, but Mio spent all that time thinking, but the best move she came up with turns out to be the worst one.

All because of the last person we expected to see



“Oh no, I’m late Why did getting my bag checked have to take so long?!”

As soon as I know the other girls can’t see me, I *slow down* right away.

“..... Compact *konbu* magic, ham ham block castle, diary newspaper into the nosebleed, water flea pairs for everyone, follow the savannah dentist——,” I recite as fast as I can.

They’re magic words that only I know what they mean! Just like the ones I was going through back on the train platform. And when I was in the train’s toilet stall, too.

This is why I stayed in Japan by myself.

I wasn’t lying when I said it was so Mama and Papa could get a head start.

But, there was something much more important to me Something else.

Something in Japan that I still had to do. And to prepare to do it.

So I needed time.

I pushed the flight back, as far back as I could possibly get it to go And tried to picture what kind of day today would be. I thought about what would be happening in the Shogi world and made adjustments. I even planned out this moment right now.

“Ignoring nothingness, fancy fashion girl, um Rejection beam quality propane!”

The stalls are nice and big. Plus, no one else is in here! Sweet!

“Immortal powerless sheets, narrow heart, heart to chick, harsh summer thick cologne, unmarried bamboo! All set!”

I head into a stall and sit down *on top of the toilet lid*.

Then I fish my phone out of my backpack.

Next up, open my Shogi app. My opponent and I already agreed to play today.

Actually, I should’ve signed in a little bit earlier. I hope they’re still up for playing a match

“Yees! There’s the invitation!”

I’m playing against—*Black Cat*.

We played a long match with tons of waiting time last night, and they promised to do a quick match with me today before signing off. Black Cat started teaching me a whole lot before the King of Naniwa Tournament, but I’ve never beaten them. Not once.

That’s why I’m winning today no matter what!

“It’s on!!”

I’m in a rush, so I set the clock for three minutes of waiting time. Yes! I got the first move, just like I wanted!

The defender gets to choose how the formations will turn out, but Black Cat always goes along with whatever I start playing.

Because, well, they’re confident that they can handle anything someone my

level can throw at them.

“But I’m not the usual Mio today!!”

I race through the early-game using my favorite sequence and keep up the pace in the mid-game, trusting that my fingers know what to do.

It’s the late-game that matters.

“I’ve got more time than them! I’m winning!!”

My clock says I’ve got about a minute. They’re down to 30 seconds.

The first one to hit zero loses, so this’ll be over in about a minute and a half.

“Haaaaaaaaa—— Mn!!”

I hold my breath.

>A minute and a half A race to the finish!!

“.....!”

If this were a 100-meter dash, I’ve got a 50-meter lead on them. I don’t even need to look at my own King at this point. Just stay focused on checkmating them and I’ll win. The goal tape is right in front of me I just need to go through it!

My heart is pounding up a storm. Even my fingers are shaking with every beat.

“But, just a little further I can do this! That’s checkmate!! Finally, I’m going to beat Black Cat!!”

I thought too soon.

They don’t try to outrace me to the finish But just, *plop*.

A pebble right at my feet.

A disposable Pawn gets tossed in my path like a tiny rock.

“Ah?!”

It distracts me for just a second, makes me take my eyes off the finish line for just a moment and I trip. Face plant And Black Cat makes it to the finish line before I can get up.

“Grrr! They got me”

They were down to one second of waiting time. But there was no panic whatsoever. They must've read all the way to the end.

But it was more like they messed me up than I messed up myself.

It almost feels like they were counting on me to get nervous once I realized I was about to win That wasn't even a match with the real board, but my mind got read like a book. Whoa

They had me dancing in the palm of their hand

"Man Black Cat is really, really strong! I would've never thought to throw away the Pawn like that Crafty."

Yep, it wasn't an accident. They set me up for it. That nasty little No, that's called being strong in the late-game.

I know I made a good dent, though.

Sure, I tripped up at the very end, but that means——.

"I was in the lead from the start all the way to the very, very end. If I hadn't been playing Black Cat, who's naturally just good at defense I would've won."

Good mindset, fingers are moving and my instincts are on fire.

Even better than that The fact that I was in the lead against that early-game mastermind even for a second means that my research is working.

Now with a boatload of confidence, I finish my business in here. Whew

"I wonder what European toilets are like. Do they have heated seats and warm bidets, too? Or are they"

I'm a summer baby, so winters are rough for me. I've heard that some pros do better in certain seasons than others. Like, they can only win titles in the summer leagues, or do so well in winter that they get called the *Winter Shogun*.

"Then again, Sora-sensei said she'd *die out in the sun*, but she made it through the 3-dan division in the middle of a heatwave. Maybe that's just a superstition?"

I give it more thought as I leave the restroom and head back to the Chinese place where the other girls are waiting for me.

That's when I see her.

"Huh? No way Huuuuuuuh?!"

She's in a café just around the corner from the toilets.

Sitting in that fancy café sandwiched between a really expensive-looking clothing store and one of those general goods stores.

Swiping her fingers back and forth on a tablet at a table by the window is——.

The craftiest girl I know with all the pride and grace of a pretty black kitty.

"Ten-chan?!"

"Well, what a surprise."

Passing her tablet to the lady sitting next to her, Akira Ikeda, Ten-chan gets up without making a sound, just like a cat would.

Is this a coincidence?

"Grandfather is coming back from an overseas business trip," Ten-chan answers before I can ask.

Yeah, that makes sense. She's meeting her grandpa at the airport.

"Wow! What time does your grandpa's plane get in?"

"Not until tomorrow."

"Huh? Then what are you doing here?"

"Familiarizing myself with the terminal."

"Wait, wait, wait. Why would you need to?"

Take an express train, and it only takes 30 minutes to get to the Kansai Airport from where Ten-chan lives in Kobe. Why can't she just admit she came to see me off?

But I know there's warm kindness beneath those cold pricklies, so I can't help grinning at the look on Ten-chan's face.

"So, where are you off to?"

"I'm moving to Europe. I'm sure I've told you lots of times by now. I also sent you tons of messages saying that today's the day."

“Is that so?”

Ten-chan is playing dumb, isn't she? Anyway, she points over to the clothing store.

“In that case, I'll give you a farewell present. Choose anything you like.”

“What?! I-I couldn't I'd feel bad.”

“Huh? So you're refusing to accept my kindness? Who do you think you are?”

“Uhhhhh

Part of me wants to say, *look who's talking*, but I know this is Ten-chan's way of being nice.

Well, I don't want to be rude!

“Hmmm Then, would you get this T-shirt for me?”

It's about 1,000 yen and has the word *Osakan* printed on it. Wearing a shirt like that in Japan would be kinda embarrassing, but it'll get a laugh out of foreigners for sure.

“Absolutely not! The air is dry and very cold over there. Choose something more appropriate.”

“B-Buuut!! I-I already checked in my suitcase——.”

“Wear it on the plane and there won't be a problem. Here, take this and this one, too. Akira, to the register.”

“At once, My Lady.”

Ten-chan grabs some things off the rack and lines them up with my shoulders. Next thing I know, Akira is paying for them at the counter. Eeep!

“Th-Th- Thanks. I'll send you something once I get there.”

“That won't be necessary.”

“But, I want to! No?”

“..... Well, I bought you something just because, so why would I stop you from doing the same thing?”

That's Ten-chan's way of saying, *Thank you! I can't wait to see what it is!* I think.

But, what should I get for her? Sending her something that she already has would be a real bummer.

So I try to get her to narrow the field down for me.

"Have you ever been to a different country, Ten-chan?"

"Grandfather has many long-time connections in Russia, and I've accompanied him a few times."

"Ten-chan in Russia"

She'd fit in so perfectly, it's scary. The Russian tundra has to be about as cold as she is.

"This is a picture from her most recent trip."

Akira is right beside me with her phone held out. Wasn't she at the register? When did she have time to take out her phone? I didn't even know she had a phone on her. But this picture seems kind of tender

“Wow! That’s exactly what I had in mind! You look good in anything, Ten-chan.”

She’s got on a big, furry black coat and a black hat that’s just as puffy. Everything she has on just screams, “This is Russia!” If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was a real doll. Ten-chan looks like something out of an old anime in that outfit.

“Do you have more?! What other countries have you been to?!”

“The last one was Italy.”

“Italy!”

Mama Mia! Pasta! Pizza!

“Once the Queen Title Match concluded, grandp- My grandfather took me on a holiday cruise in the Mediterranean once he finished some business in the area. We visited many islands and dined with the locals wherever we went. Even without knowing the language, you can still become friends by sharing a meal.”

“This is a photo from that trip.”

Akira slides her phone back into my line of sight. Wow, she’s like a machine, pulling it up that fast. It’s like she does this all the time.

“Woow! You’re so cute, Ten-chan≡.”

The Mediterranean sun is high overhead and she’s got a fancy white dress on with a huge hat that looks like wings over her head.

Really, it’s like she stepped out of a Miyazaki movie. She’s cute: no ifs, ands or buts about it.



But How can Akira pull out all these photos on cue? Does she always have them with her?

Another thing is bugging me, too.

“They’re pretty places, but Italy and Russia don’t have much in common, do they?”

Maybe I’m just stupid?

I’m the one who’s moving to Europe, but it’s embarrassing how clueless I am about the place. Well, it’s better to be embarrassed once by asking than to be embarrassed my whole life without a clue. Running away is shameful, but it helps.

So it’s time to find out!

“Hey, Ten-chan? What kind of business does your grandpa do?”

“What kind?”

Ten-chan blanks for a second and then turns around.

“Akira. What was the purpose of that trip?”

“Restocking.”

Bam! Akira hits us with that word and then dead silence.

So They bought something overseas?

Ten-chan scratches her chin and stares off into space like she’s trying to remember something.

“Now that I think about it, Grandpa and I were the only ones on the plane home. You came back on a boat with everyone else, didn’t you, Akira? We all flew out together Was whatever you bought that dangerously heavy?”

“O-Oh well, it doesn’t matter! I don’t need to know every little thing about your grandpa’s job! Silly me!”

The air takes a sudden, dark turn, so I jump in before Ten-chan can say anything else. Looking around, there are a surprising number of security guards with their eyes on us. Were they always that close?

We’re being watched?!

“Hey! W-Wanna go for a walk outside?! Let’s go watch the planes!”

“..... Huh?”

She gives me a blank look, but I grab her hand and pull her out of the airport.

“Look! There are so many planes! They’re huge, aren’t they?!”

Seeing everything from the end of the path outside the terminal is so exciting, but Ten-chan just says coldly, “There isn’t much to see. The building is in the way.”

“A-Aha-ha-ha Well, this place is off the beaten track.”

I brought her to the spot that Ayano told us about, but it’s smaller than I thought. The runway is on the other side of the terminal building and it’s hard to see much of anything

But you can see the planes heading into the sky.

“.....”

The two of us just stand there and watch the planes for a bit.

Those gigantic machines take off and fly into the clouds so fast.

That’s how I’ll be leaving pretty soon.



I'm grateful that Akira is waiting for Ten-chan just far enough away that she can't hear because it gives me a chance to talk with her, just us.

"This is our first time talking like this, isn't it?"

"The first, and I pray that it's the last."

"Don't be like that. Don't come crying to me if you're lonely after I'm gone. Besides, who's going to invite you to the Grade Schooler Practice Group once I leave?"

"Hah! What a relief. This may be the perfect opportunity to break away entirely!"

"You can't get rid of them that easily Like Shogi pieces."

Besides, I know that's not how Ten-chan really feels.

If she wanted to break away, there's no way she would've come all the way out here with me right now.

Actually, her being at the airport at all shows how kind Ten-chan is.

She's done a whole bunch more things for me, too——.

"You know, Ten-chan?"

"Hm?"

"I've been jealous of you for a long, long time."

"Because of my Shogi skill?"

"That's part of it, but"

Yes. That's part of it.

But that's not all of it.

"It's your position I'm jealous of, I guess Your standing? Maybe?"

"My position?"

"You're like ... a lone wolf."

".....?"

It looks like she doesn't get what I'm saying at all.

Sure, from her point of view, I'm always with someone else. She must think I like being the center of the group.

"I make friends right away, don't I? But you don't have any."

"Are you trying to start a fight?"

"I was complimenting you."

Okay, maybe I was taunting her a bit, too.

Her angry face is just so cute. It brings out who she is.

I want to burn that face into my memory.

That way, the next time my fighting spirit is close to breaking, I can see her getting angry at me.

"You You've changed."

"Oh?"

"Is this who you actually are deep down?"

"Aha-ha! Nope! This is me trying too hard."

I take Ten-chan's hand and put it up against my heart.

"I'm trying to find the *line* you won't let me cross right now. I think I found it, but I just stepped over it a little. See? You can feel that right? My heart pounding."

"Hmph you overplayed."

Ten-chan spurns me in Shogi terms. Then she takes her hand away just gently enough not to be rough.

So, I got too aggressive and my formation crumbled, maybe?

But you have to play that way sometimes to get stronger, don't you?

"I think people like me when they meet me. No, that's not it I'm afraid of them hating me. It's so, so scary"

"Everyone is afraid of that. It's perfectly normal."

"But you're not afraid, Ten-chan."

"..... I would love for people to take to me like they take to you."

“What? Sorry, that airplane engine was too loud.”

“I said I would love to be an airhead who can laugh things off like you.”

“Meanie!!”

It’s being able to just say things like that whenever she wants that makes me jealous.

“Okay then, Ten-chan. What do you think of me? Would you tell me since it’s my last chance to know?”

“As a Shogi player?”

“Um Yes. If you would.”

I’m a bit scared.

But I wanna know!

What was Ten-chan thinking when we played against each other?

“To be blunt——.” Ten-chan lets one of her vampirish teeth poke out and then says, “Your Shogi is too inconsistent.”

A fastball, right into the strike zone! Man, that ripped through my heart.

“..... So, you’re saying my good moves are good, but my bad moves are really, really bad?”

“Exactly.”

“Then, I make good moves?!”

“Decent ones, yes.”

Harsh. Ten-chan is seriously harsh.

“Your decision making throughout one match is extremely inconsistent. You’ll play an extremely good move and then follow it up with the worst one possible. Additionally, you’ll be in a position to win only to trip up at the last moment. Your heart waivers and it gets reflected in your Shogi. That’s why your winning percentage doesn’t reflect your ability. Shogi is a sport where the last one to make a mistake loses, no matter how much of a lead they have built.”

“Ungh Taking that to heart

She put all my mistakes on parade almost like *doing a review session of the match I just played*. My spirit is *this close* to snapping

“A King of Naniwa champion should have no issue reaching B rank in the Practice League. In fact, someone with that level of skill not qualifying for the Women’s League is outrageous.”

“M-Me?! In the Women’s League?! Oh, no, no, no!!”

“Yes, you can, and you should.”

Ten-chan puts her hand to her own heart.

“Mio Mizukoshi, you have the talent necessary to play in the Women’s League. I guarantee it,” she says, loud and clear.

“!! Ten chan!”

What she just said. Those words she said to me just now.

After hearing them, I feel like no matter where I go, no matter who I face.

I can take them on without fear, just like Ai Yashajin does.

“..... Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Ask as many as you like. This is your last chance, after all.”

Wow, that was blunt. But that’s her way of announcing that she’ll answer anything. I knew Ten-chan is nice!

And since she’s so nice here I go.

One deep breath and I ask away.

“Sora-sensei became the first girl in the pros yesterday, right? Would you tell me what you think about that?”

“Why?”

“No reason, really.”

I lie.

It rolls off my tongue a lot smoother than even I was expecting.

“I just want to know what you think about it.”

“.....”

The first time, Ten-chan thinks to herself.

One plane two planes go by.

Then, just as I'm watching the third plane leave the ground, Ten-chan finally starts talking.

"It feels like a loss, somewhat. But——."

"Yeah?"

"The Sub League is a bizarre place. Once every two weeks, the results are announced without any match records accompanying them. So how can I put this? I guess I don't see a connection between strength and winning percentage"

She spins on her heel and starts waving her arms in the air like conducting a band. But to me it feels like she's giving the feelings in her heart the wings they need to fly into the sky.

"I faced Ginko Sora in a series of matches and was swept. I did manage to force her into a repetition draw while on defense, but I couldn't win when the first move was mine. That's the same as being overpowered at every turn. So, I think the difference in our ability level is as clear as day *to people watching from the outside.*"

".....! Ten-chan"

Chills run down my spine.

I've got goosebumps.

There's fire in my veins.

..... Hot.

"I don't care if I get called a sore loser. But I don't consider Ginko Sora to be out of my reach. After that title match I know I'm right. Her becoming a professional changes nothing."

"Then——."

Working up the guts, I ask her.

"Then you wanna go pro too? You know join the Sub League?"

“No, I don’t. I don’t have aspirations of joining the professional leagues. Though I will reconsider it if the Women’s League player system is eliminated now that a female has become a true professional.”

“You think you can get stronger as a Women’s League player?”

“I do. There’s more than one way to improve. That is evident by watching the professionals.”

“Like using computers?”

“I think that’s one way, yes. It’s also effective. But it’s not the only way.”

Ten-chan sounds so sure of herself.

There’s fire in her unblinking eyes. I can tell she’s picturing Sora-sensei right now.

“We’re different types, Ginko Sora and I. She can get stronger the old-fashioned way, by committing years’ worth of effort toward achieving her goal. On the other hand, I’ve decided that I learn better when I’m on a big stage under the lights. The Sub League isn’t for me.”

“..... Man, you keep an eye on everything. Even yourself”

“No matter how well you know your enemy, there’s no telling if you win or lose if you don’t know yourself. However, know yourself and your enemy like the back of your hand, and you’ll never lose. That’s one of the basic principles written about war a long time ago. It’s nothing new.”

“A long time ago How far back?”

“2,500 years, I think.”

“WOW!!”

That’s even before Shogi was invented!!

“You really are amazing, Ten-chan! I wish I could’ve learned lots more from you!”

“Really? I see you more as the chatterbox type.”

“That’s because you ignore me so much”

But Ten-chan catches every little detail.

She's even picked up on things about me that I hadn't noticed.

"Hey, do you remember Sora-sensei's birthday party last year? We ended up going with your idea in the end."

"Ah, yes That day."

She scowls.

"To tell the truth, that certain someone also secretly gave a present I had no part in that day."

"Ohh? I've got a feeling I know who it was."

"Is that right? But, I doubt you could ever guess what the present was in a million years."

Mnnngh?!

Now, I have to get it right!

"Since we went with that present, I think you gave them cash!"

"Wrong. Are you brain-dead?"

"Ummm Flowers!"

"Wrong."

"Then pork dumplings from 551!"

"Wrong. You're just listing things that you want for yourself."

How rude!

"I'll give you a hint. It's something you wear."

"Huh?! Could it be a ring?!"

"Wrong again. This is going to take forever."

"Okay, I don't have to guess, but tell me, Ten-chan! This'll bug me so much I won't be able to get on the plane!"

"Understandable. And I wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing you were late for your flight because of me, so I'll tell you. Though, there are a few details I'd rather not remember"

So Ten-chan hops on the memory plane and tells me what happened that day.

We had that party on September 9th last year.



CELE-
BRATING
☆
GINKO
SORA

CELEBRATING ☆ GINKO SORA



It was yes.

Last year, after the Mynavi Preliminaries and the Meijin officially became the challenger in the Ryuo Title Match Maybe about three weeks afterward.

Ai Hinatsuru, Keika Kiyotaki and I were all under pressure as the Mynavi Finals were about to begin and *Sensei* was busy devising a strategy for defending his title, so we hadn't seen much of each other at all.

Despite that, I got a message out of the blue.

“We’re throwing a birthday party for Ginko Sora, so come to Osaka.”

Me, partaking in a gathering like that, absolutely not!

I was set to face Sub League member Karen Noboryou in the first round of the Finals. As she is a member of the Kanto Sub League, I had no match records to go on. No amount of preparation will ever suffice when going against an opponent who is shrouded in so much mystery.

Besides, I fully intended to win the tournament and take Ginko Sora's title for myself! So why did I have to celebrate her birthday with the rest of the Shogi family?!

..... Well, I did end up going.

Huuh? You say I end up going to a lot of events despite my complaints? M-My hands were tied! Just let me explain, will you?!



“Ooooh! Cha, Cha's neber been to a deepatmant stwore in Osaka befowe!”

I rub my temple in frustration as the little golden one runs around like she is in a candy store.

It seems

“Charlette has never been to a department store in Osaka.”

At least, I think that’s what she said.

September 9th. Including myself, four of us have gathered at a department store in the heart of *North* Osaka, Umeda.

Our unbalanced group of three elementary-aged girls accompanying a high school-aged boy would draw enough attention anyway, but one of our number being a golden-haired half-pint has other customers *and* staff members staring.

Said golden-haired half-pint running circles around us is getting on my nerves.

“Ch-Charlette! You have to walk inside the store!”

Ai Hinatsuru goes to chase after her, but our Master Yaichi Kuzuryu pompously puts his foot down.

“Listen up, you two. We’re not here to have fun, okay? We came to find a birthday present for Big Sis, so hurry up and choose something.”

Huuh? *Hurry up and choose?* Excuse me, but that’s my line. Why did you bring us along in the first place?

Or are you the one that’s *here to have fun?* Look in the mirror, trash.

“My word Why do I have to come along to choose a present for Ginko Sora?”

“Because you’re part of the same Shogi family.”

Obviously? Don’t take that tone with me, idiot.

“I’m fine with chipping in to cover the cost, but I don’t see why we all had to go out of our way to come here and pick a present in person. We aren’t friends here, and I have no intention of changing that!”

“Warm up a little, will you? Remember that touching speech you made for me on my birthday?”

“Th-That was! I told Ai that I wouldn’t do it in a million years, but she forced me

“Adorable. Your shy side is so adorable, Ten-chan.”

“Do not pat me!”

I hate to admit it, but it’s just as he said.

Both Ai and myself won consecutive matches during the Mynavi Preliminaries And wished our Master happy birthday during the presentation ceremony afterward, where I said this: “*Today I played for you.*”

I know. You don’t have to say it.

I regret those putrid words to this very day!

“The other day what was it, August 24th? You grumbled so much about the birthday party we had for Mio at my place, but you still showed up, right?”

“How could I not, with the chatterbox calling me every day! It was *come to my party! come to my party!* nonstop! If I didn’t go, she would have been inviting me to next year’s party every single day over the next 12 months!”

“You really are nice, Lady Ai. Not only did you come to Osaka from Kobe today, but you’re even planning on coming to next year’s birthday party despite all your complaining.”

“I won’t be!”

“Easy, easy. Just be around in October, okay?”

“Huuh?! Are you saying there’s something coming up next month, too?!”

“Your older sister apprentice’s birthday, that’s what. I’m pretty sure it’s——.”

“My birthday is October 7th!” says Ai, her eyes sparkling up at Yaichi while holding the little golden one by the scruff of her neck like a cat carrying a kitten. He nods back at her.

“That’s what I thought.”

“My birthday is October 7th!”

“I-I remember, okay?”

Yaichi shudders at Ai’s persistence. Then he looks down at me.

“Yours is December 10th, right Ten-chan?”

“Why do you know that?”

“And Ayano’s is in December, too,” Ai chimes in.

“Four eyes? What day?”

“The third.”

Just a week apart

Somehow it feels strange knowing that The most forgettable member of that practice group feels closer to me somehow. Our zodiac signs are the same, as are our horoscopes. Which means our profiles are strikingly similar.

Birthdays. What strange things they are.

Just as I’m mulling that over Yaichi starts grinning at me.

“How about that. You’re the youngest of the four, aren’t you Ten-chan?”

“Huuuh? Keep talking with your head in the clouds and I’ll poke your eyes out.”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it?!”

“We’re in the same grade, so what does it matter? Besides, four eyes is only a week older than I am. Why are you so hung up on such a small detail? Is a single day that important to a lolicon?”

“Yep, there’s no topping those precious moments right before the bud blooms into a flower Hah! I’m not a lolicon, got it?!”

“Please walk on the other side of the aisle.”

“Don’t you know a joke when you hear it?! I took the cue from you!”

Is that so?

Of course, I believe this *lolicon* thing is just him trying to be funny At least, I want to believe it ... though I have my doubts sometimes.

I put some space between us, but Ai rushes in to take my place right at Yaichi’s side.

“Master, Master. When are Keika’s and Grandpa-sensei’s birthdays?”

“They’re both in November, so we usually celebrate both at once.”

“So, yours and Mio’s are in August, September is Aun- Sora-sensei’s, mine

is in October, Keika and Grandpa-*sensei*'s are in November and Ayano and Ten-chan have theirs in December. We get to have birthday parties every month!"

How can she be excited about something so terrifying?!

"I won't be coming, so you don't have to celebrate mine!"

My plea falls on deaf ears, however, because Yaichi leans down to ask the golden loli in Ai's arms at eye level, "And, when's your birthday, Charlette?"

"Winber!"

"Huh? Winter What month?"

"Hmm Winber?"

"Around Christmas, maybe? Or after New Year's?"

"Winber!!"

This is going nowhere.

She's probably too young to divide a year into anything less than individual seasons yet. Her level is even lower than the ancient Mesopotamians who had no concept of a calendar. No wonder she can't understand.

"S-Still It's not for a while yet! Let us know when it's coming up."

"Cha, Cha gwets a paatee too?"

"Of course! I'll get the whole town to throw you a party, Charlette!"

"The town?!" Ai and I say in utter shock at Yaichi's claim. Just what is going on in his head?!

"I'll put you on a float and parade you up and down the shopping arcade."

"Wid music and ebewyding?"

"Sure will! I'll even let you ride just like this!"

Yaichi then takes the golden loli from Ai and plops her down on top of his shoulders.

"Whooo≡ Masta is so twall!"

"Hahaha! You barely weigh anything, Charlette!"

The half-pint is ecstatic and the lolicon is dancing.

And the happier the lolicon is, the more disgruntled Ai and I become.

“Hey You’re embarrassing us.”

“Master, you *darabuchi*! Why is it always Charlette?!”

The lolicon realizes the formations aren’t in his favor and quickly puts the half-pint back down on the floor.

“Oh, yes! N-Now’s not the time for goofing off. We better find a present for Big Sis quick, or else Keika will finish the cake before we get home.”

That hag is making cake?

Best case scenario, it turns out as bland as miso soup without any other ingredients.

Ai seems to share my reservations.

“Is Keika good at making cakes, too?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure. I’ve never seen her make one before. Cookies, yes, but not cakes. She just decided she was going to make one this year Then she kicked us out so she could *prepare in peace* and said she’d go along with whatever present we picked. So here we are.”

Hmph.

That hag is the right age to get married, so perhaps she’s realized that honing her skills as a housewife would be more lucrative than building up her Shogi skill. Prudent.

“Are you certain this is a good idea? Whatever she makes will be edible, yes?”

“It’ll be fine, Ten-chan. Mio and Ayano are with her, too. What’s that old saying: *three heads are better than one*?”

“I don’t know about that, four eyes, but having Miss Loudmouth in the kitchen only makes me more concerned”

Because, as they say, having too many cooks spoils the broth. I hope this turns out differently.

“As long as Big Sis stays out of their way, we’re good,” says Yaichi offhandedly with complete faith in Keika Kiyotaki’s abilities.

“Ginko Sora’s cooking I have never tried it myself, but is it really that bad?”

“It’s terrible. Speaking as a survivor, be grateful you don’t have to suffer through it.”

“Huh? So, what happens when you eat it?”

“Well, first words start slurring together.”

“That’s the same as puffer fish poison!”

“Then comes numbness in the extremities, and it gets really hard to breathe”

“Eeeek——!”

“Ha-ha-ha! Most of that is just a joke, of course.”

..... Most of it?

“Still, she won’t try to bake her own birthday cake, so we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“While I’m curious just how much was true and when the joking began We don’t need to be concerned, do we? There’s going to be other food at this party, yes?”

“I’m pretty sure Twelve is going to cater it. Keika said she spoke to the owner, so I think everything is worked out. He’ll probably pull out all the stops.”

“Hmph. Well, if they’re in charge of the food”

That place prepares food for players during their lunch hour all the time, a go-to restaurant of sorts. The owner has a craftsman’s mentality. The flavor certainly isn’t bad despite him being the only one working there. The best part is that he keeps to himself and doesn’t engage me in pointless conversation.

“Ten-chan, what’s your favorite thing to get at Twelve? I like the butter rice!”

“Mine is tongue stew.”

“Master! That’s the most expensive thing they have!”

“J-Just like a real princess!”

“What is that look for? You’re better off financially than most other people.”

“Cha, Cha’s neber eaten at Twelbe.”

After learning that she is the only one here who hasn’t been to Twelve, the golden-haired half-pint makes her case to Yaichi and gets extraordinary results.

“That’s right, you haven’t! Alright, I’ll take you there myself! You can have anything you like!”

“Cha, Cha wants puddin!”

“Pudding, huh? Even your favorite foods are cute, Charlette≡”

“Hey, lolicon. Quit getting distracted by the brat and choose a present already.”

I scold Yaichi and grab him by his right ear.

“That’s right, lolicon. You know better than this.”

And Ai pulls on his left.

“Ow-ow-ow! Y-You guys Have some respect for your Master”

“Sure, sure, oh great lolicon-*sensei*. Do you know what Ginko Sora’s interests are?”

“Things Big Sis likes? Umm Shogi?”

“Obviously. Everyone here knows that she likes Shogi. I’m talking about her other interests or small items that she collects.”

“Small things that she likes? Well I know she buys a pennant wherever she goes to play title matches.”

“That’s a rather solitary hobby”

Picturing Ginko Sora visiting the touristy souvenir shops at inns and hotels around the country, I’m not sure how I should feel or what to say.

I’d prefer not to learn any more of this kind of information because it will dampen my fighting spirit.

“Shogi players tend to be solitary people in general. Sitting and thinking is our job.”

“..... Having it put like that makes it feel like I’m missing out on life.”

“That, and Shogi players don’t tend to live as long as other people.”

“Their love for Shogi is all that keeps them going

“Th-That’s enough of that—,” Yaichi says, getting back on topic as he removes our hands from his ears. “I honestly don’t have a clue what to get for Big Sis. Keika’s always been the one to pick out presents for her

The closer someone is to you, the harder they become to shop for.

There may be some truth to that.

If someone were to ask me what present would make my deceased parents happy, I would struggle to come up with anything.

“Whenever I asked her what she liked, Big Sis always said Shogi. She’s never said anything else. I know what font style she likes engraved on the pieces, but that’s about it.”

“What kinds of presents has she gotten in the past?”

“I’m pretty sure Keika always got her clothes.”

Clothing. I’ve only ever seen her in that sailor-style school uniform of hers, so I would have no idea where to begin.

Ai seems anxious as well.

“It’ll be hard to choose something without knowing what size she wears.”

“Exactly! And she’d kill me if I started asking for her measurements

“Why would you ever give her underwear in the first place?!”

“I-I wasn’t talking about **those** measurements!! Besides, girls need them, don’t they?!”

“Not for Ginko Sora, I believe. Her chest being what it is,” I point out, half-jokingly. But Yaichi gives it serious thought.

“Well, I know, but Big Sis turns 15 today, so she can’t be that flat for too much longer.”

“Would you just forget about underwear!”

“Cha, Cha wants pwuri cuwe pwanties!”

Ai is steaming with anger, but the half-pint starts making requests.

Which apparently triggers Yaichi's lolicon switch.

"Pretty Cure panties? Alright, Charlette, I'll buy you a full week's supply!"

"Pwuri cuwe pwanties!"

"Why is it always Charlette? No fair! What I meant was, why do you have to buy her seven of them?!"

"Huh? I mean, wouldn't it make you feel good to know that Charlette is wearing the undies you bought her for a full week?"

Seriously Gross.

"What you just said made me nauseous."

I give him a piece of my mind, but Ai only mumbles how she feels at her feet.

"Unghhh Master My Master is getting more and more perverted There's no saving him now"

"I do not envy your position Living under the same roof day in and day out"

Now that we've become the center of attention, Yaichi panics and blurts out an excuse.

"I-I was just kidding You don't have to look so sad"

"I'm sad because it didn't sound like a joke!"

"C-Come on everyone! Any other ideas?"

Sigh Wasting any more time on this would be absurd, so to the matter at hand.

"What about stuffed animals? I don't think any girl would hate receiving one as a present."

"Big Sis has one, a really big one, actually."

"That's unexpected. Does Ginko Sora cuddle with it when she sleeps at night or does she play house?"

"No, she uses it to practice suplexes and throws."

“Practice? And who does she use them on?”

“Would you like to know?”

“I’d rather not ask. I think I know the answer already”

“C’mon, ask me! Actually, listen, Ai! You won’t believe that girl! She used to fold me up like a pretzel and hurl me across the room whenever I beat her at Shogi! Even now, the back of my head hurts whenever it rains outside!!” Yaichi beseeches me with tears in his eyes.

Though I can’t really sympathize because there’s something about his tone that makes it sound like they were having a lover’s spat—.

“Masta, head hwurt? Cha, wub wub?”

“*Sniffle* You’re such an angel, Charlette If only you were my older sister apprentice”

“Fwhee? Cha, Cha Masta’s big sista?”

And now I’m queasy again. That pervert

The golden-haired half-pint looks just as confused with her head tilted like that. I don’t blame her. It seems Yaichi’s brain knows no bounds when it comes to Shogi and lolicon tangents

I force my anger to simmer down before asking him.

“..... Are you sure she didn’t use that stuffed animal for more girly things? Maybe having it next to her was the only way she could get to sleep after watching a scary movie

“Nope, she used me for that. We had a bunkbed when we were live-in apprentices. She’d always wake me up to go to the bathroom at night after watching some ghost stories on TV and force me to stroke her hair until she went back to sleep

That last tidbit is what it took for Ai to lift her gaze off the floor and slowly turn toward Yaichi.

“Are you sweethearts?”

“Huh? I don’t get where you’re coming from

“But Master, you never do those kinds of things for me when I see scary shows on TV. But you stroke Auntie’s hair and hold Charlette, just like right now.”

“Charlette’s still little, so

“I’m still nine! Only by a little, but that’s still one digit! I’m allowed to go with you into public baths!”

Whisper, whisper We officially have an audience. The security guards have noticed the crowd.

Without a second thought, I put some space between us and pretend to be a bystander.

“H-Hey! Ai! Not so loud! Can’t you see we’re not the only customers here?! They’re going to get the wrong idea

No, I don’t think there are any misunderstandings going on.

“I-I’ve got it! Ai, what present would make you the happiest?”

“Uwhee?! M-Me

“Yeah. Just name it.”

“Anything

“And I’m happy to hear that, but I was hoping for something more ... specific.”

“.....”

Words fail Ai Hinatsuru.

She spends a few moments deliberating about whether she should say it or not

The cycle repeats itself a few times until.

“W-Well, then

Ai says exactly what she wants.

“..... A ring

“A ring? With a jewel of some kind? That’s pretty expensive

“The price doesn’t matter! It doesn’t have to have any diamonds or anything at all! Actually, a plain ring is fine!”

“Really?”

“Yes! A simple silver band Th-That matches yours

Pardon me.

I believe that’s called an engagement—.

“Ring, huh Would Big Sis like one of them?”

“That’s what I want! But you aren’t allowed to give Auntie one as a present! She’ll misunderstand!”

“*Misunderstand?*” a very confused Yaichi repeats.

Has every facet of his brain unrelated to Shogi rotted away?

“I’d be handing it to her saying, *Here’s your birthday present*. What’s there to misunderstand?”

“I-It’s, um, well You just can’t, okay! I forbid it!”

“O-Okay! I won’t, I won’t! Besides, when it comes to rings, Shogi players don’t wear them that much They can be distracting for opponents, so most take them off before matches anyway.”

A bizarre twinge in my heart urges me to break into this conversation.

“I agree that the occasional glint from across the board is distracting.”

“Yeah. And there’s the fact that Big Sis doesn’t like flashy things or accessories that much, so she probably wouldn’t wear it anyway.”

“I wonder? That snowflake hairpin of hers was a present from you, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, but It was really cheap,” Yaichi says without any idea what I was getting at. Yes, it does look like something out of a bargain bin.

However, that’s exactly why—.

“I didn’t put much thought into it, either. I just happened to find it at the gift shop in the hotel where Big Sis was staying when she won her first title.”

“And she’s worn that piece of cheap plastic ever since, hasn’t she? The girl you say doesn’t like accessories.”

“Yeah, she has.”

“Then anything will do. How about one of those packs of tissues that guy over there is handing out?”

“Hey, don’t interrupt, Ai! We were getting somewhere, so why in the world would you suggest tissues?!”

“How should I know, *darabuchi*?!”

“Why are you angry?! Please, you two. I don’t have any idea what junior high school girls like. If you would just help me out, we’ll be done with this a lot sooner.”

“How about another hairpin like the one she has? That one is getting old and you said it’s cheap, right?”

“Hmm That might work, but this is supposed to be a present from everyone. It doesn’t seem right to get her something that I already gave her.”

That’s right. As this is *from all of us*, it will reflect on us as well.

“Then how about a pet?”

“A pet Lots of Shogi players like the comfort of having pets at home.”

“Maybe if she had a small furry companion for comfort, some of the rougher aspects of her personality might improve.”

“..... Same goes for you.”

“What was that you just said, piece of trash *Sensei*?”

“Nothing! Yeah, getting her a pet sounds good! She’s living with her parents right now, so we don’t have to worry about pet restrictions like at my apartment! Great idea, Lady Ai!!”

Finally, we have a direction. All that’s left is figuring out what kind of animal
.....

“What type of pet do you like, Master?”

“Cute mammals, for sure. Lizards and fish are cool, but I don’t want one.”

“That’s fairly basic.”

I’m not good with scaly creatures myself. Not that I have anything against people who like them.

“And gold fur would be good.”

“A golden retriever would be a good option.”

“Or a Pomeranian! They’re so cute and fluffy ≡”

“Green eyes, too.”

“Yes, a cat wouldn’t be bad, either.”

“Meeow≡”

“Nice and small.”

“They’re easier to take care of, too.”

“And fumble around with word sounds.”

“You’re describing Charlette!!”

“Whoa! Y-Yeah, I guess so That wasn’t on purpose

It sounds like he wants to hold her hostage.

“Fwhee? Masta wants Cha to be a pwet?”

“No, no! I couldn’t keep you as a pet, Charlette! That’s——.”

“Bwing me hwome?”

“Huh?”

“Masta, Cha, bwing hwome?”

“Th-That’s so ADORAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAABLE!”

It’s official, he is broken.

He picks up the golden-haired loli holding her arms out wide and declares for all to hear, “It’s settled! I’m taking you home with me!”

“M-Master! Our apartment doesn’t allow pets!”

“B-Buuut! I wanna keep her! I’ll take care of her, I promise!”

“You know you can’t do that!”

“C’mon, please! I’ll teach her good manners, feed her, take her for walks And bathe her every day!”

“Bath twime!”

“He-he-he≡ This is going be so awesome, my very own pet Charlette≡ Let’s see, she’ll need pet food, her own bed And what else? Oh yeah, a collar so she can go on walks. Man, we’ve got so much to buy today.”

“Have you forgotten about me?! Master, you *dara*! Loli-King!”

“Would you cut it out with this lolicon thing?! It’s starting to hurt!!”

“Ungghh *Sniffle* I-It’s knowing that my own Master is a pervert who wants to keep a six-year-old girl tied up at home like a pet th-that huuurts!”

Ai collapses onto the department store floor in tears.

Meanwhile, I find the thought of him keeping a nine-year-old elementary school girl as a live-in apprentice to be questionable.

“I-I was just joking around You know, liven things up and make you guys laugh. Why are you crying like that?”

“I’m *angry* because it sounded like you were serious!”

“C-Come on everybody! Remember why we’re here?! To buy Big Sis a birthday present, that’s why! Now choose something!”

“..... You’re the one who forgot because you keep getting distracted by Charlette’s cuteness”

“What would be good? There are so many options, it’s hard to tell!”

Yaichi is trying his hardest to change the topic.

Sigh Perhaps it was a mistake to take him as my Master after all.

“Ah, I almost forgot”

There is an envelope stuffed into my pocket.

Akira gave it to me just before I left this morning.

“My lady. I have important business to attend to today and cannot accompany you, but ... please open this envelope once you arrive in Umeda.”

Akira has been by my side as far back as I can remember and knows me better than anyone on earth. She also shares some *lolicon* tendencies with Yaichi. Therefore she might know exactly how to fix this situation!!

“.....”

Filled with a new ray of hope, I open the envelope and find——.

“High-spec compact digital camera! Sends real-time video and audio to your smartphone via the Internet. Perfect for checking on your children and pets while you are away! On sale until 9/9.”

A clipping from a magazine and a Yodobashi Camera point card inside.

She wants me to buy this for her while I’m in Umeda?! She clearly wants it for all the wrong reasons! Probably will end up installing it in my room or someplace worse!!

I throw that useless ad and point card into the trash without a second thought and mention something I catch out of the corner of my eye on the way past.

“What about a parasol? She tends to use them a lot.”

“Ooh! One of those sun umbrellas! Big Sis does need them because she can’t take direct sunlight and having several won’t be a problem! Yes! That’s perfect!”

“That sign says they have them on a different floor.”

“Go find one she’ll like for me. Here’s some money to pay for it,” Yaichi says as he looks at the loli no, lobby to find another escalator.

“There’s something else I want to buy while I’m here.”

Ai looks up at him with suspicion.

“..... Is it a collar?”

“Heck, no!!”



Ai Hinatsuru sounds so pleased with herself as she leans over into the front

seat of the taxi to say, “Master! We got a good present, didn’t we?!”

After spending the entire afternoon at the department store, all of us boarded a taxi at Umeda station to go to Noda, where Grand Master Kiyotaki lives, just as the sun starts setting.

Just to let you know, we chose a white parasol for Ginko Sora. She always seems to have a black one with her, so we decided to get one in a different color.

Yaichi looks back at us through the rearview mirror from his spot in the passenger seat and says, “You sure did. Big Sis is going to be thrilled. Nice job!”

“It’s been a long day and I’d like to go home now,” I quip at him.

“Ai, listen We’re on our way to the party right now, so you could at least try to be excited”

I’m exhausted, so no.

“Come on, there’s a delicious cake waiting for you!”

“A cake made by the old hag and four eyes? I have a hard time believing it will be edible, let alone delicious. I guarantee whatever they have at the convenience store over there would taste better.”

The golden-haired half-pint is sitting between Ai Hinatsuru and myself in the back seat with a satisfied smile glued to her face.

“Cha, Cha can’t wait fo cake!”

“Okay, you can have mine.”

“Cha lubs Ten-chan!”

“Hey?! Don’t touch me with your drool-covered hands!”

“C-Calm down, both of you! It’s too cramped for pushing and shoving!”

“Now, now. I’m glad you are getting along so well, but you’ll end up breaking Big Sis’s present.”

Just then, Yaichi’s phone dings.

“Oh! A message from Keika Huh? She’s asking me to stop by Twelve on the way home to pick up the food. And the cake isn’t turning out like it should,

so send Ai Hinatsuru over a.s.a.p. Hm.”

“What did I just tell you? Their attempts to bake a cake failed.”

“I-It’s still too early to give up! I’ll figure something out You and Charlette can help, too!”

“Cha, Cha spwead whipped cweam!”

“In that case, I’ll put the strawberries on top.”

“Ten-chan, help out a bit more than that, please!”

“Try? These hands are for playing Shogi. I’ve never cooked anything in my life, so be grateful I’m offering to do the strawberries.”

Yaichi puts his phone back in his pocket and takes out his wallet instead.

“Excuse me, driver? Would you please stop by the Kansai Shogi Association building? I’ll be getting off there, but please take these girls to the address I gave you earlier. I’ll give them money before getting off, so please give the change to her Ai, give me the change when I get there, okay?”

“Okay, but what are you going to do, Master?”

“It sounds like there’s going to be a ton of food, so I’ll call another taxi.”

It takes all of five minutes to get to the Kansai Shogi Association from Umeda by taxi.

That brown building comes into view surprisingly quickly and Yaichi gets out.

“Master! I’ll make sure the cake is good, so don’t worry!”

“Masta, bwe bwe!”

Ai opens the window on her side and the half-pint joins her in seeing Yaichi off.

That’s where we parted ways with Yaichi.

So I wasn’t present during this next part.

However I can describe it all as if I were in the room with them.

Because I saw everything.



“..... Now then, I’ll pick up the food and get out of here.”

After watching the taxi drive off, Yaichi comes to a stop in front of the door to Twelve, a restaurant on the first floor of the association building. It is separate from the association’s main entrance.

There happens to be a sign posted on the door that says, “Dining Floor Reserved Today.”

“Oh? Someone reserved the whole restaurant? Oh well, I’m just here to pick up, so I’m sure it’s fine.”

As a regular customer, Yaichi casually walks in without a moment’s hesitation.

A cowbell over the door clangs as he steps into the dimly lit restaurant and tries to get the owner’s attention, but

“Helloooo? I’m here to pick up the order that Huh?”

Sitting there—is the last person he expected to see.



“Yaichi?”

Ginko Sora.

The star of today’s party is at the counter all by herself.

Furthermore, she isn’t wearing her normal school uniform but a chic dress. Ngh! So, she can look cute

“Big Sis? What are you doing here?”

“I offered to help with cake, but Keika said she ‘couldn’t allow that’ and told me to *go get the food*. So, here I am

“You were kicked off the cooking team?”

“Want your head on a pike?”

“S-Sorry

Ginko Sora slaps the open seat next to her a few times like she’s demanding that he sit down.

“..... But I can’t complain. It’s hard to know where to be when your own birthday party is being set up

“I can understand that.”

Sitting down but putting most of his weight on his elbows on the counter, Yaichi turns to the back of the restaurant and tries yelling for the owner again.

“There should be an order from Keika. Is it ready yet?”

He gets a mumbled response.

Then Yaichi answers back with all the energy of a flat cola.

“Huh? You need a little more time? Sure, I’ll wait

Then, he turns back to Ginko Sora and whispers in her ear.

“..... Man of few words, isn’t he?”

“I don’t see the problem. We all understand each other.”

She responds while running her finger around the rim of her half-full water glass. I’d say she is prepared for an extremely long match.

Yaichi seems to have come to terms with reality and lifts his upper body off the counter to sit up straight. Then he changes the subject.

“I have to ask What’s with that dress, Big Sis?”

“A present from Shakando-*sensei*.”

“Ah

He nods, connecting the dots.

Women’s Legend Rina Shakando is the most decorated figure in Women’s Shogi.

She is also Yaichi’s good friend Ayumu Kannabe’s Master.

At the same time, she owns a fashion brand and manages two apparel shops in Harajuku. Perhaps that is the reason why Master and apprentice show up to their matches dressed as if they were taking part in a Takarazuka stage show. It must be an off-the-board tactic.

The dress Ginko Sora has on today is nowhere near as gawdy as Shakando-*sensei*’s brand. In fact, it’s quite simple but too nice to wear at the Shogi Association.

“Keika wouldn’t leave me alone until I put it on. Something about wearing it out of the box. Even Shakando-*sensei* has demanded pictures of me wearing the dress at the party

“Well, she has hosted you for practice sessions many times. You could go along with it as a thank you to her?”

Yaichi forces a grin and then casually adds, “And yeah. It’s cute.”

“Perv.”

“Huh?!”

Twelve’s owner then steps out of the kitchen.

“Oh! Is it ready?”

Yaichi thought he had been saved from Ginko Sora’s wrath, but the owner didn’t bring the food. Instead, he has two glasses with him.

Two cocktail glasses, each filled with a sparkly liquid.

“Huh? Are these because it’s going to take even more time?”

“These cocktails don’t have alcohol in them, right?”

“I didn’t know you had anything this fancy

Of course, neither of them ordered it nor does it exist on the menu.

Ginko Sora, bewildered, studies the glass placed in front of her.

“Since it’s already here Do you want to toast?”

“Oh, um, sure. Cheers

They lift their glasses.

Then, a high-pitched *clink*.

“I know I’m the only one here, but happy birthday Big Sis.”

“Thanks

Yaichi takes a big gulp while Ginko Sora has a few small sips. What’s with this mood

“Hey, not bad! I didn’t know the owner could make drinks like this, too.”

It just so happens that the owner appears once again just moments after Yaichi utters those words. This time, however, he’s carrying a tray.

“Soup this time?”

“This is turning into a full course meal

“He got our order, right? It should be a few bags of take-out Oh well, I was starting to get hungry so might as well.”

“Yes Ah, here he comes again.”

Ginko Sora was expecting more food, but that wasn’t it.

The owner gives her a small box.

“Huh? For me? Th-Thank you” Marveling at the articulate wrapping, Ginko Sora manages to say, “Sir? What’s this box for? Excuse me, sir?”

However, the restaurant owner disappears into the back room without saying a word.

The two look at the box he left behind.

“What could it be?”

“..... Maybe he got you a birthday present?”

“How would the owner of Twelve know my birthday?”

“Keika might’ve told him when she ordered the food, yeah? It’s not like the two of you are strangers, so it wouldn’t be out of place if he wanted to give you something.”

“Well I have been a regular customer since I was four.”

“And you’re probably the only one who orders the Dynamite Set. Maybe this is his way of saying thank you?”

“Why would he?”

“You never know. Naniwa’s Snow White’s passionate fans might come here on a pilgrimage to order the Dynamite Set one day.”

“That will never happen, and you know it.”

“So what’s in the box? Open it up!”

“I will, but It’s surprisingly light.”

“Light? Ah! W-Well it is your 15th birthday, so maybe he got you your first bra?!”

“Why would you even think that?!”

“Owch!”

Apparently, Ginko Sora landed a swift kick to his shin under the table. The dull thud all but confirms it.

My trashy Master never fails.

Those few words completely destroy the mood. Late game strength that defies logic. An ace on the board, to be sure.

“I’ve worn one for years, for your information! Ready to die?!”

“Huuuh?! B-But there isn’t much point to a bra with a chest like yours, is there? Oh, could it be like weighted training bands in anime? You know, when

fighters take it off for a power up in the middle of a battle?”

“You idiot! How would taking off my bra in the middle of a Shogi match make me any stronger?!”

“Well, it’d distract your opponent for sure.”

“And cause such an uproar that the match would get called off right then and there! Stupid, perverted, sicko!”

“You didn’t have to go that far

Personally, I would’ve gone further. Trash.

Ginko Sora scrunches up her lips and sharply whispers, “..... Mine aren’t as small as you seem to think

“Big Sis? Did you say something? Your voice was just as nonexistent as your boobs so I couldn’t hear anything.”

“That does it. You’re dead!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I got caught up in the moment, and I’m sorry, sorry, sorry!!”

Yaichi grinds his forehead into the counter.

Ginko Sora sighs with frustration, rips the wrapping paper off the box and looks inside.

“My word. Why do I have to put up with this on my birthday? Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“The box It’s empty

She says, unsure. Yaichi leans over to have a look for himself. Hey Don’t you two know about personal space? N-Not that I care either way

“Maybe he forgot to put it in?”

“Oh, there’s a piece of paper

“Like a message card? Then what was the box for?”

“There’s something written on it.”

“Show me, too, Big Sis. What’s it say?”

Yaichi peeks into Ginko Sora's hand.

Then the two read the card aloud.

"Ginko, happy birthday! This year, I'm giving you exactly what you would enjoy the most. Have fun! Keika"

The two crane their necks, bewildered.

"..... What's that supposed to mean?"

"Keika wrote it, right? That means that Keika is the one who wrapped the box."

"But, for what?"

"Something you would enjoy?"

"It's the *have fun* part I don't understand How can I have fun with an empty box?"

"Good question. Maybe she's saying to enjoy the air?"

Ginko Sora's expression changes the moment Yaichi thinks that out loud.

"..... The air?"

"Is it a brainteaser? Now that I think about it, things aren't adding up about this restaurant, either. Somebody reserved the dining floor, but no one's showed up yet."

"..... Reserved?"

"Then there's the food. We ordered a whole bunch of take-out, but get soup and cocktails instead? It's like someone set it up so that the two of us could celebrate your birthday and have the restaurant to ourselves, don't you think?"

Crackle!

Ginko Sora's milky white face turns bright red as if catching fire from within. Then she utters a series of curses aimed at Keika Kiyotaki under her breath.

"..... K-Keika, how can I have fun when you spring this on me out of the blue?!"

Well, the sequence of events seems clear now.

That old hag orchestrated every single thing that happened thus far.

Splitting up the Grade Schooler Practice Group ensured that we never questioned Ginko Sora's location. Sending Ai Hinatsuru and myself to accompany our Master's shopping trip was so we would put down our guard.

"Yay! Shopping with Master≡"

Ah, that look of pure rage on Ai's face when she learned the truth.

Infuriating! We played right into her hands!

But the most infuriating aspect of all of this is that my piece of trash Master is so inept that he hasn't realized what happened despite saying it all out loud! How is that possible?!

"..... Why should I care?"

"C'mon, Big Sis! Drop the high and mighty act and tell me what's going on!"

"Drop dead, Trash! You soiled piece of brain-dead lolicon trash!"

"Hey, calling me trash twice was uncalled for!!"

"..... Idiot."

"You don't have to be so harsh just because I don't know the answer"

"..... That's not what I'm talking about, idiot"

Yaichi didn't hear the words Ginko Sora muttered under her breath, per usual. At this point, he has to be doing this on purpose, right?

"Yeesh Everybody's gotten mad at me today. First my apprentices, and now even my older sister apprentice."

"All your fault, no doubt."

"What am I doing wrong?"

"Your face. Your attitude. Being you."

"So mean, " Yaichi groans.

Ginko Sora isn't letting up.

"Why is it you get so hung up on the other girls going way back, but always spurn me?"

"I think you got that backwards. You're the one who's rough on me."

“..... Who’s the one who said *you can be my bride* to that small fry?”

“Charlette? Look, I only said that to distract her because she wanted to be my apprentice——.”

“Then what was up with *give me your daughter* and *join my family* when you were talking to your actual apprentices? That’s what people say to pop the question!”

“I didn’t mean it like that”

“But you proposed to Keika. *I’ll marry you once I’m a professional Shogi player, Keika!* Don’t tell me you forgot?”

“I-I was six years old when I said that! What first grader hasn’t said they’ll marry someone?”

Indeed, Yaichi has a point about that. I distinctly remember telling grandfather I would marry him around the time I was in kindergarten.

Ginko Sora, however, is not satisfied. In fact, her mood seems to be worsening.

“You never said that to me, not once.”

“You were like the perfect *big sister* to me back when I was a kid, so——.”

“You’ve never called me a big sister in that sense, either.”

“Well, you’re my older sister apprentice, but I’m older than you are.”

“I’m still the older sister.”

“Big Sis You want to be my bride?”

“I’ll find a way to kill you twice.”

“What? Why?! That’s the direction the conversation was going, wasn’t it?!”

“Hardly. Are you that stupid? Why don’t you do us both a favor and hit your head on the corner of that table and die right now?”

Yaichi asks the obvious question in the face of Ginko Sora’s verbal lashing, “Then why do you care who I ask to marry me?”

“I want the chance to say *no* when you ask me to be your bride.”

“Why?”

“Because it would feel amazing, that’s why.”

“That’s not cute at all, Big Sis.”

“I’m not *cute* in your eyes anyway. The only girl who would fit your description of cute would have to be under ten years old with a set of the double D’s. Sorry to disappoint you.”

“What do you take me for?! That figment of your imagination couldn’t possibly exist!”

“..... says the boy who only likes big boobs and little girls.”

“Sure, I like them, but Hey, wait! I don’t have a thing for little girls!”

It’s rare that counterarguments are so unconvincing.

“Look, mixing things together doesn’t always turn out for the best! Aliens from the planet Loli and aliens from the planet Knockers are totally different! Mixing them together is too dangerous!”

“Whatever the case, I’m not *cute*, am I?!”

“Um, Big Sis? You’re missing the point. I didn’t tell Keika or Charlette that I would *make them my bride* because of big boobs or because of being a lolicon, which I’m not. Besides I think you’re more than cute enough as you are, Big Sis. Just my opinion, though”

“Okay, you are now required to propose to me the next time I beat you in Shogi.”

“How did you reach that conclusion?”

Exactly! Why did it come to that?

However, Ginko Sora excitedly presses past this question to say, “So, let’s play Shogi.”

“Say what? Here, now?”

“7 Six Pawn.”

“Hey! You’re on offense?!”

“It’s *my* birthday. So of course you should give me a handicap present.”

“Alright, okay, fine Then 3 Four Pawn.”

Yaichi plays the second move. It’s a safe, completely orthodox choice.

However, it turns out that opening the Bishop Path was a critical error.

“Oh and by the way, you’re giving me a two-piece handicap.”

“Whaaaat?! Wh-Why do I have to play with both hands tied behind my back?! Besides, the one giving up pieces in a handicapped match is supposed to go first!!”

“You said you’d give me a present. Now, 1 One Bishop Promote.”

“..... I lose.”

“Giving up already?” says Ginko Sora with forced surprise. Shameless

“Two pieces down to start with, losing my Lance for free and a Promoted Bishop in my territory? Anyone in their right mind would throw in the towel! I wouldn’t stand a chance against you playing with a two-piece handicap anyway?!”

“Surrendering after just three moves You must be dying to have me as your wife, Yaichi.”

“No, listen to me——.”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little desperate?”

“I didn’t have a fair chance at the start——”

“Surrendering to Ginko’s charms! Is that it?”

“..... Aren’t you embarrassed, saying that out loud?”

“Are you asking for a pike through your head?”

“Sorry, sorry, I got caught up in the moment! I’m really sorry!”

Yaichi’s forehead is back on the counter.

Meanwhile, Ginko Sora pokes the back of his head with her finger and says as if thoroughly enjoying herself, “Isn’t there something else you’re supposed to say right now?”

“Whaaa- Do I have to?”

“Now, now. Hurry up!”

She grabs Yaichi’s arm and swings it back and forth the way a little girl would ask her friends to come out and play.

Yaichi has to muster the courage to utter words that take more resolve than “I lost.”

“..... Please be my bride.”

“He-he-hee≡ I’d rather die≡”

..... Well, that was sweet.

So sweet, I think I’m going to be sick!



The cowbell clangs again as Yaichi and Ginko Sora leave the restaurant together.

“The food was great!”

Now it’s completely dark outside.

Ginko Sora rubs her bare arms as the night chill sets in.

“..... We ended up staying for dessert.”

“I know Keika set this up, but I feel bad for making everyone else wait. We need to get this food to Master’s place fast I think getting a taxi would be easiest.”

“I’ll flag one down. Make sure the bags don’t tilt while you wait, Yaichi.”

“Will do.”

Yaichi stands perfectly still with a burgeoning bag of food in each hand. Ginko Sora walks up to the street and raises her hand to get the attention of a passing taxi.

Whether it’s the surprisingly heavy traffic or that Ginko Sora needs to work on her hailing technique, none of the passing taxis pull off to the side of the road.

“No one is stopping”

That's when.

"Um, Big Sis?"

"Yeees?"

"This is kind of embarrassing to say, so please keep your eyes on the road."

"Okay?"

Ginko Sora had started turning to face him but looks back the other way and tenses up as if she's turned to stone.

Yaichi continues, "You see I took the Ais shopping today to find your birthday present. Something really shocking hit me while we were there. The two of us lived in the same room for 10 whole years, but when it comes to things you like other than Shogi I have no idea"

"....."

"But I don't find that sad or anything It just means that that's how hard the two of us were focused on Shogi. I would've never turned pro if I was on my own, and certainly wouldn't have a title I think it's because you were there, because my older sister apprentice is Ginko Sora that I've come this far."

Their hearts are beating so loudly that I can almost hear them all the way over here.

Streetlights reflect off Ginko Sora's watery eyes, making them light up like the sea at night.

"So What I'm trying to say is, thank you for being born Ha-ha, sorry. That sounded weird, didn't it? I'm not used to this sort of thing. I guess what I should be saying is——."

Then, Yaichi says it.

Calmly and smoothly after a short pause.

"Happy birthday Ginko."

In that one fleeting moment a single thought crosses my mind.

How nice it would be for someone to celebrate me like this on my birthday. Just for that moment, though.

“Yaichi

Standing perfectly still, she calls her younger brother apprentice’s name. Just that.

“Oh yeah! Actually, I have a present for you, too.”

“Huh?”

“Remember when I said that my apprentices and I went shopping to get a present today? Well, I found something else that I thought would look great on you and bought it.”

Ohhhh? So that’s what he was up to?

Probably when Ai and I were at the register. Hmph. *Sigh*

“You chose something for me?”

“Here. I don’t know if you’ll like it or not.”

Yaichi pulls a small parcel out of his pocket and holds it out to Ginko Sora.

It’s wrapped in very cute paper. There are enough manga characters printed on it to bring a smile to any little girl’s face.

“Th- Thank you

“It’s nothing major. Cheap, too.”

Yaichi grimaces.

Even so, Ginko Sora holds this tiny, cheap bundle in her arms like the greatest treasure in the world and does her best to speak.

“That doesn’t matter Thank you. Thank you so, so much

“I-I’m glad to know you’re happy. It makes buying it feel worthwhile

“..... May I open it?”

“Of course.”

Crinkling and rustling ensue as Ginko Sora removes the wrapping paper.

Suddenly shy, Yaichi stares at his feet and mumbles a bunch of words.

“I just knew it would be perfect for you when I saw it. The one you have now, it’s pretty old, right? So I thought a new one would——.”

“..... Yaichi.”

“So I bought it for you. I don’t know if you’ll like it as much as the old one, and of course you can still wear the old one if you want, but I know you will look great with it on——.”

“Yaichi.”

“Hm? Something wrong?”

“You’re saying I would look good in this?”

“Yeah, it’s a hairpin like DAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH?!”

The item clenched in Ginko Sora’s trembling hand.

It’s——a small pair of panties.

“You’re saying that this pair of Pretty Cure panties would look great on me? That my *childish* body needs equally childish panties to match? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Panties?! WHY?!”

“That’s what I want to know! Are you *trying* to make me mad?!”

“N-NO! Definitely not! There’s been a mistake! Your present must’ve been in the other pocket Y-Yes, here it is!”

“Before that, may I ask you a question? Why did you have little girl panties in your pocket in the first place?”

“W-Well, you see They were a present for Charlette”

“You bought underwear for that little tot?! Are you insane?!”

“B- But, she said she wanted them, so I got a present for her while I was getting yours——.”

“WHILE?! YOU BOUGHT PANITES FOR A LITTLE GIRL WHILE SHOPPING FOR MY BIRTHDAY PRESENT?!”

“That’s not what——.”

Yaichi shrinks back in fear of the look in Ginko Sora's eyes.

And who should arrive on the scene but——.

“Ah——! There you are——!!”

“A-Ai?! What are you doing here?!”

“Keika did this, all of it! She made it so you and Auntie were alone!”

“Huuuh?! Wh-Why would she do that?”

“How should I know?! Master, you dumb *darabuchi*!!”

Brand-new combinations come out one after another. It seems anger can be a good source of creativity.

I arrive on the scene a few moments after Ai and hold up my smartphone for them to see.

“Technology has become so convenient. So long as you have a few cheap digital cameras from the Yodobashi electronics store in Umeda, you can see exactly what's happening someplace else in real time through your phone.”

Ginko Sora and Yaichi gasp simultaneously. “C-C-C- Cameras?!”

Then their faces turn beet red. What kind of reaction is that? Now my blood is starting to boil

Now then, it's time to pull back the curtain.

How could I, who had been waiting at the Kiyotaki household all this time, talk about the goings on at Twelve *as if I saw the conversation* between Ginko Sora and Yaichi?

Perhaps you've already figured it out?

Well, the truth is *I did* see it.

Keika asked Twelve's owner for permission to install a few cameras inside and outside the restaurant just for today. The same cameras that were on sale, actually.

So we all watched them from the house.

As their back-and-forth was heating up, I discovered that four eyes, that chatterbox, has a surprising taste for romantic stories.

“Ummm! Is it really okay for me to watch? Really?”

“Th-This is a violation of their privacy! But it’s also an invaluable chance for me to learn from, so just a little This is a learning opportunity For future reference”

And whatever nonsense Ayano was telling herself, but the girl never took her eyes off the screen. Then there was Keika Kiyotaki with a bottle of wine.

“Go! Go! You’ve got ‘im! Go get ‘im!!”

So much yelling.

Of course, Ai Hinatsuru gave her the scolding of her life when she found out.

In fact, she was so furious that she threatened to bake Keika Kiyotaki into the cake instead of the other ingredients. That’s when I pointed at the screen and asked her.

“Are you sure you want to let this continue?”

It goes without saying that her answer was no. Ai jumped on a train for Fukushima Station like a woman possessed, so I followed her to make sure a member of our Shogi family wouldn’t be investigated for murder.

“So, so You saw everything?”

“We did. From the romantic mood that you and Ginko Sora created to you accidentally giving her a tiny pair of girls’ underwear that you bought behind our backs.”

*“You sent us off so that you could secretly buy something *from you*, and then go have a fancy meal with Auntie, just the two of you?! What? Did you want to say *I got this for you* that badly?! If that’s what you were thinking, I’ve got no problem putting you in the cake along with Keika!!”*

She’s still very hot under the collar

I, on the other hand, have cooled off quite a bit. This is a public place, so it would be best not to make a scene.

Not to mention that our Shogi family line has already caused enough incidents around the Kansai Shogi Association building. Grand Master Kiyotaki relieving himself out the window, for instance.

“Calm down, would you? The cake was better than expected, and we had a nice time. We are the ones who spied on them, after all, so biting off their heads won’t——.”

“You were fidgeting the whole time, Ten-chan!”

“Huuu?! I was not *fidgeting*! J-Just irritated that the food was taking so long to arrive!!”

Why did I get restless anyway?!

Ginko Sora comes up to Ai and myself during our argument with the underwear still clenched in her fist.

“Pipsqueak. Where’s Keika?”

“Someplace where she’ll have a long time to reflect on what she did, so she’ll never think about doing this it again.”

“I approve.”

Naniwa’s Snow White nods with satisfaction.

“Yaichi.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Put the food down and kneel right here.”

“Huh? But it’s concrete”

“Kneel.”

“Okay.”

Yaichi does as he’s told, placing the bags out of the main walkway before coming back and taking a knee in front of Ginko Sora. The Dragon King Ryuo is on his knees before the association.

He’s conducting himself with the same bold confidence he has when he enters an arena, but it’s just sad out here.

“Put these panties on your head.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Put them on your head or die. Which is it?”

“I’ll put them on.”

“You mean *it will be an honor*, right Trash? Oh, and end every sentence with the word *loli* until I say stop.”

“It would be an honor, loli.”

The person who holds Shogi’s most prestigious title is on his knees with girly panties on his head. It’s a sight that would surely force him to abdicate if a journalist working for the newspaper that sponsors that league were to set eyes on him.

“Pipsqueaks. Both of you, get over here. I’m sure you have many things to say to your Master? Go ahead, I’ll let you vent for as long as you want We have plenty of food and time.”

Ginko Sora waves us over.

Yaichi meekly asks, “Um Before that, may I ask something?”

“That being?”

“Wh-What’s about to happen loli?”

“Curious?”

“Y- Yes”

“We’re going to have a party. Except, rather than being grateful that I was born, you’re going to regret it”

And so——.

Yaichi was presented to a now 15-year-old Ginko Sora (with Ai) for a one-rank higher punishment.

You would have never seen the sunrise if I hadn’t stepped in, so be grateful, *Sensei*.

*This story is a novelized version of the Drama CD included with the special release version of *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done! Book 6*.

THE LAST LUNCH.
THE LAST GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 3



THE LAST LUNCH: THE LAST GRADE SCHOOLER

PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 3



“S-So, that’s what happened”

After hearing Ten-chan’s story, that’s really all I, Mio, can say.

I saw up to the point where things started looking lovey-dovey between Kujyuru-*sensei* and Sora-*sensei* at Twelve, but that’s when things started going downhill for Keika. Things got so bad that there wasn’t time to watch any of the phones.

I can’t believe he gave her little girl panties Sora-*sensei* must have been so ticked. Just because hers are small doesn’t mean it’s okay to do just anything.

Still, anyway.

“Sora-*sensei*’s birthday is coming up again, isn’t it? I wish I could go again this year, too.”

“Seriously After everything I just said, you *still* want to?”

“But there’s so much more to talk about this year! Who knows, Sora-*sensei*’s birthday may become a Shogi world holiday! Man, if only I could delay my flight long enough so I could be there”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. News programs have been talking about her day and night, but people involved with Shogi aren’t sure how to feel about her promotion.”

“Huh?”

“She’s being anointed, from a certain point of view.”

Anointed? Like the ceremony?

That’s what they call the big ceremony that’s put on to congratulate the player who wins a title, right?

The rest of the girls and I got to go to Kujiyuru-sensei's anointing ceremony, and I remember everything being all smiles

"Whether it's the *first in history* or *breaking new ground*, as far as other players are concerned, these words mean *it's impossible for you* and brand them as *failures*. Think about it. Wouldn't that give everyone a chip on their shoulder? Make that searing pain in their hearts burn even hotter? At the very least, those who consider Ginko Sora to be their rival won't be able to talk about what happened yesterday with a smile for the rest of their lives. Some, like me, had time to mentally prepare, but still."

"Ah"

I know exactly what that feeling tastes like.

Actually, I still have that taste in my mouth right now.

If all the *Senseis* in the Women's League are feeling the same way——.

"..... Well then Today's *the only day* to do it after all"

Ten-chan must have heard me whispering under my breath because she doesn't ask me what I said.

But she does say, "I have no idea what you're planning, nor am I the least bit interested. However, if it's what I think it is Allow me to say this"

Those pitch-black eyes of hers swallow me whole.

It's like we're in the late-game and she's bound and determined to take me down.

This must be what a frog feels like when it sees a snake. I'm surprised I'm not shaking in my shoes right now.

Fear is starting to take hold of me when Ten-chan starts talking again.

"The higher the stakes, the more you tell yourself this is your only chance, the scarier the match becomes. However, that scary feeling is what's important."

"..... !! Being scared is important"

Ten-chan pokes me in the chest with one of her pale white fingers.

"Take on the challenge that is the scariest for you. A few jitters won't do. The

challenge, whatever it is, must be intense enough to shatter your cowardly heart to pieces. Put everything you've built up on the line for one Shogi match. Your life will change if you win, I guarantee it."

"..... Do you think I'll ever be like you, Ten-chan?"

"Possibly."

I look up at the sky.

The plane that just left the runway a minute ago disappears behind the clouds It's totally gone now.

Just like that. And I'm still here on the ground.

I look back down at the toes of my shoes and sigh.

"But say I did bet everything on a scary match. What happens if I lose?"

"Beats me. I've never thought about it."

Liar. I can just tell.

Ten-chan's face is so relaxed, I can see right through it. *The way it always is.*

I'm sure no, I'm definitely sure that she's thought about it hundreds, maybe thousands of times. Thought about when she loses. And I'm sure she's still fighting that fear right now.

— That's why Ten-chan is so strong.

The difference between me and her is painfully obvious.

Painfully obvious how big it is.

The difference between people who fight when they sit at a board, and those who keep fighting even when they're not.

—Actually Ten-chan might be under the least amount of pressure when she's playing Shogi

She never told me about how her mom and papa died, but I've heard the story from the other girls.

They said it was a horrible, extremely unlucky accident.

Not just anyone can get stronger by going through something like that. I'm

pretty sure that most people get overwhelmed by tragedies and soul-crushing losses.

But this girl right here named Ai Yashajin, she overcame it. She's my age, too.

Which means I can't say that I can't do it, right?

"Here's one more parting gift."

"How many is that now?"

"Being charitable is the duty of the strong," she says with a small *heh* and pulls back her long, black hair.

Then she flips it out like a black wing and calls Akira a little way away.

"Akira! Start the car."

"Going home already? Why don't you come see everyone?"

"I'm busy. Now that Ginko Sora has officially become a professional, her titles are vacant. I must secure Queen and Women's Throne for myself."

"Are women barred from Women's Matches after turning pro? Did she have to give her titles back?"

"That's what the current rules say. Although it seems the sponsors would like Ginko Sora to keep the titles and there are some high-ranking members of the association who agree."

"Who do you ask about stuff like that? I just kinda figured Women's League players found out naturally But they don't, right?"

"I looked into it myself, of course. I have connections."

"..... Like Akira?"

Just as I ask, Akira stops walking toward the parking lot and says, "The Yashajin Group also includes private investigation agencies."

But she doesn't say anything else. She's kinda cool at times like this

Ten-chan explains more for me.

"We don't put our name out there, but my family's business has a relationship with many companies that sponsor Shogi events and leagues. In fact, one of them is the main contributor to the Women's Legend League. Only the art

museum that the contributor's company owns gets mentioned. That contributor offered to have our name affixed to the tournament at one point because of our involvement in Women's Shogi."

"Wooow"

"Still, we refused because the drawbacks outweigh the benefits, for now anyway."

Now that I think about it, Ten-chan being a part of the *Yashajin Women's Legend League* would be a little I don't know how the other *Senseis* in the Women's League could focus

"I am satisfied with being a Women's League player," Ten-chan says without looking at me.

"There are problems with the league, yes, but there's no denying that more girls have started playing Shogi because of it. I also understand why the Sub League and the professionals get all the attention. However, getting stronger requires many things ... the most important of which is provided by the Women's League system."

"The most important? What's that——?"

"A place to compete against fellow players."

Whaaat?!

"T-Ten chan? A-Are, are you saying——?"

It was really fast, but I know what I heard.

Ten-chan said it.

"I'm glad I met all of you." I know it!

"That was a parting gift. Don't waste it."

She looks back over her shoulder with a smile and the kindest look in her eye.

Somehow that's not the Ten-chan I know, but someone much more grown-up.

I haven't seen her since the day we did the summer festival in the shopping arcade a few weeks ago, but still.

Kinda like Yeah, a girl *who went to the next level with a boy* during

summer vacation——.

“You’ve changed, Ten-chan.”

“Have I?”

“Yep, I think the old you would’ve said something like *D-Don’t get the wrong idea because I didn’t say that!!* or something.”

“Akira. Pistol.”

“My lady. At the airport, I cannot.”

At the airport?! So, does that mean she’d take out a pistol someplace else?!

Ten-chan’s terrifying!

“Hmph! Seems I was foolish for wanting you to stay in Japan! Go abroad, go to hell for all I care!”

“B-B-Buuut

“Look, it’s possible to play Shogi and speak with anyone for free over the Internet nowadays, yes? We never were the type to meet face-to-face day in and day out to begin with, so this changes nothing.”

“You’re right! I can still have *Black Cat* teach me Shogi from anywhere in the world!”

“Meow?!”

Now that the kitty has suddenly turned bright red, I let her have all the ammo I’ve built up all at once.

“Whaaaat? Do you know them, Ten-chan? *Black Cat*.”

“N-No, never heard of it! I don’t know that account!”

“Ohh? I never said it was an account on a Shogi site. So, how do you know? C’mon, tell me! Pretty please!”

“Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!! I’m never playing against you again, got that?!”

Ahaha! Yep, this is how Lady Ai should be.

I’m glad to see the Ten-chan I know is still around!

But——.

“I’ve decided to stop pretending and trying to hide my true feelings,” Ten-chan says openheartedly.

“There’s something that I want. If I want it badly enough, then I don’t care who tries to get in my way. They don’t scare me at all.”

“.....!!”

Wow Ten-chan’s got her own spotlight It’s so bright I have to look away.

And I happen to see a plane out of the corner of my eye.

But it’s not one that’s taking off. *This plane is coming into Japan.*

“Speaking of which There is a bracket for international participants in the Women’s Throne League, yes?”

“Yep. What about it?”

They do this thing where they invite women who do really well in Shogi tournaments around the world. There are some foreign *Senseis* in the Women’s League because of it.

Shogi can be played anywhere in the world now.

So there are strong people who aren’t Japanese, and plenty more strong foreigners are going to show up, so I’ll have plenty of people to play with ... probably.

So——.

“If you’re gonna be a dual title holder”

“Hm?”

“Then I’m gonna be the European champion!!” I declare loud enough for people all over the world to hear.

Even those plane engines can’t get in the way.

Nothing is going to steal my thunder, ever.

“I’ll get stronger! Strong enough to be a challenger for the Women’s Throne! Then then——!!”

“Heh.”

A little smile shows up on Ten-chan's face.

Once she flips her hair like a black wing one more time, she reaches out to me for a handshake.

"Come back stronger than ever. If you do I'll dance for you on the brightest stage."



My full name is Ayano Sadatou. I'm a girl in the fifth grade no different from other fifth-grade girls.

My defining feature? My glasses, I guess.

Something unique I can do? I play Shogi. As I'm registered with the Kansai Practice League, I suppose you could say I'm training to join the Woman's League one day.

Therefore, other students at my school in Kyoto often say that *I'm amazing or look smart*.

However, when I'm in the company of prodigies like Ai Hinatsuru or get compared to the grit and determination that Mio Mizukoshi has, I get lost in the shuffle

Despite promising to meet Mio in the final round of the King of Naniwa Tournament, I lost to a girl my own age, Marina Kannabe, in the Semifinals. It wasn't even close.

Since I couldn't give Mio one last match on a big stage before she left Japan, I was planning to use that pain as fuel in my Practice League matches to improve my record Unfortunately, the reality was not so forgiving.

Even with being able to practice at the Ryuo's apartment, a fortunate opportunity I never thought I would receive, I have been marked with a B in the Practice League. I'm in danger of disqualification.

I possess neither the skill required to enter the Women's League nor the

determination, and now Mio, my only source of motivation to continue playing Shogi, is moving to a different country

The strong face I've put on has been to make sure Mio didn't become concerned about my well-being, but I have had far too much on my mind recently.

I went to the person I respect more than anyone in the world, my elder sister apprentice, for advice and our conversation went like this.

"I myself was not born with substantial talent. Compared to O-Ryou or Ginko, I am but one of the masses. Committing a great deal of effort is the only way to close the gap."

"Big Sister Machi ... but, I already am trying my best. What should I do when I work harder than all the others and still——?"

"Simply, your effort is insufficient. Commit extreme effort."

"Extreme effort?"

"Those words were passed on to me by a player that I hold in the highest regard. As a passive, straight-laced style of player, taking a page out of her book may be what is required for you to break through this wall, Ayano"

I wasted no time researching the player that Big Sister Machi mentioned that day.

Then, after seeing her extraordinary and strikingly vivid match records and reading the wisdom in her quotes with my own eyes, I was awestruck.

If only I could meet them!

Just once, I would like to hear what they would do in my situation! If I ever have the honor of talking to them face to face, I would love to know what the true meaning of *extraordinary effort* is!!

Which is why——



“OOOOOOOOOCK!!”

“C*****CK!!”

No.

This ravenous beast of a woman spewing dirty words left and right can't possibly be the player that Big Sister Machi respects so much It can't be possible

“You, yeah, you, the well-hung hunk! Top me off, will ya?! More beer, more beer!!”

She yells at a young man working at the restaurant, demanding another refill on top of who knows how many she's already had.

This woman is drunk very drunk.

“Still, what're the chances?! Bumpin' into Yaichi's apprentice in a Chinese restaurant at an airport of all places! Got to check out his thing yet? Hm?”

Ai is apparently an acquaintance of hers already. Still, she slowly, cautiously attempts to say what she has already said at least 10 times up to this point.

“U-Um *Sensei*? I think that's enough——.”

“Don' get your panties in a bunch! I'm covering the tab, all of it! Order anythin' you want off the menu, all your favorites! But what I wanna devour the most isn't on this stinkin' menu! *Mngggghhhhhhhh*”

She wipes a mixture of foam and saliva from her lips with the back of her hand and then gives that same young man a hungry, and very inappropriate, stare.

“Yippie! Cha, Cha wants sheeumai!”

“Go ahead, wolf 'em down! Shumai, shrimps, shl*ngs, whatever you like. Seeing you chow down puts a smile on my face, Charlette. That golden hair too, just like a dog's. So, tell me, do the curtains match the drapes? Hm?”

“Fwhee? Dwapes?”

P-Please, stop this!

Charlette, like the rest of us here, is just as smooth down there as Sora-*sensei*!!

Handing empty jugs to the waiter who brought the shumai dumplings and another round of beer, the woman doesn't bother tightening the extremely loose collar of her kimono and downs her refill in a few large gulps and gasps for breath. Ugh She reeks of alcohol

Then she looks at me with a perfectly steady gaze.

"Ai and specs Ayano, wasn't it? You sure you don't want more food? Or wanna join me for a round? Hm?"

"W-We aren't allowed! We're grade schoolers!"

"That right? Well, they've cracked down a lot on drinkin' laws lately. Back when I was a tyke, I was drinkin' *sake* like water."

I'm absolutely certain it was illegal when you were that age

"Umm *Sensei*? Aren't you afraid you'll miss your flight if you drink too much?"

"Nahhh, it's all good, Miss Ai is the gentlewoman."

Her voice slurs between words as she drinks down the beer, seemingly enjoying every last bit of flavor.

"This airport's got a room that only VIPs of VIPs like myself are allowed in. I don' even hafta go through security. So, you see, I can drink as much as I want."

"Are you talking about a lounge?"

"Wownge?" asks a curious Charlette, taking a momentary break from shoveling the dumplings into her mouth.

"It's a special room that only airline employees or frequent flyer club members are allowed to use. For example, passengers with first-class tickets may be granted access to a fancy relaxation space. Rumor has it that people enrolled in these programs can use a lounge as a way to bypass security I don't want to say this too loud, but it apparently has been used for smuggling things out of the country in the past. As in, inside large musical instrument cases"

"Nah. It's no lounge." answers the woman, somehow keeping her intoxicated eyes steady. "Drink booze long enough in an airport, an' they'll send guys to

bring you over there. Last time, two well-endowed pieces of man-meat softly picked me up by my arms and escorted me all the way in. Ain't that the best thing ever?"

"It sounds more like being taken into custody to me"

"Shh! Ayano, SHHHHH!"

Ai is pressing her finger to her lips and desperately trying to warn me.

I-I apologize

"But, guess what. They've got tons of tax-free whiskey, vodka and even some of the stronger stuff in that room. No one's supposed to be allowed in, but the top VIPs get to go in anyway. An' I'm one of 'em!"

So that's what's going on

I quietly whisper so only Ai can hear, "..... Boarding a plane drunk is dangerous, so I think it would be best if she drank herself to sleep"

"..... Yes. That seems to be what the airport staff is trying to do. Nearly all Shogi players only travel domestically for matches *But this Sensei has to go abroad for a lot of hers*"

That's correct.

Despite playing what is basically Shogi's *neighbor* as a sport player on a board, Go, the game she plays, has successfully spread around the world. Apparently, she often travels to Asian countries like China and South Korea, but also as far away as Europe to take part in tournaments.

Though I haven't heard where she's planning to go today——.

S-She won't be boarding Mio's plane, will she?!

"I've got some personal stuff to take care of in Japan today. When I'm on official business, I'm a member of the Japan National Team travelin' with another mega hunk. We can grind out hours of studyin' in that room: 'Cuz, you know, there's no gettin' out without grindin'."

Haauuu

Well, it's a relief to know that she won't be on Mio's flight, but What she just said doesn't put me at ease at all. In fact, if a room like that did exist,

wouldn't smuggling be the least of their worries?

Despite her behavior, this person is in fact a *top VIP*, and a goddess-like inspiration to girls who play Shogi and Go.

Even Big Sister Machi said she *has no right to tread upon her shadow*, so I was excited when I happened to meet her by pure coincidence. I thought this was my chance to receive her advice But, she was in no condition to give it.

Are all prodigies like this? She is so different from me in every possible aspect that my confidence may disappear once and for all

Just as my heart starts to give out.

"Sorry, guys! I didn't mean to keep you waiting this HUH?! Who's the drunk kimono lady?!"

Mio bursts into the restaurant and rushes to our booth, only to stop and stare in surprise at the person sitting with us.

Which, I feel it's a natural reaction to seeing us sitting with a strange adult woman

However it's what Mio is wearing that surprises me.

"What's that?! Mio You weren't wearing anything that fancy before!"

"Ohh this?"

Furthermore, it doesn't match Mio's fashion sense. Black with frills, it's more like Yes, something Ten-chan would wear.

"Well, you see, um Yeah! I was looking at this in a shop window and a nice guy came by and bought it for me!"

"A nice guy?!"

That is a common pattern in *dirty* books! A gift is made with the intention of getting something in return!

"Y-You can't just accept presents out of the blue from people you don't know!"

"Y-You're right! I'll be more careful!"

"If that guy happened to be like Kuzuryu-sensei a-hem. If he were a

lolicon, this would be no laughing matter! Any man willing to buy clothing for a girl he just met clearly has impure intentions!”

“C-Couldn’t agree more! What a perv!!”

Mio agrees as she pulls the frilly garment off with a nod.

“Now that that’s settled, who is she?!”

It’s a perfectly valid question. I cannot blame her for being curious

Ai introduces her.

“This is Uzu Tentsuji-sensei, a *banshi* board master. She has a shop called Tentsuji Gobanten on the Sennichimae shopping street, *Douguya Suji*.”

“Sennichimae That’s by Namba Grand Kagetsu, right? The board maker? You know the owner, Ai?”

“Remember back to our first practice session this year when I cracked our board? She’s the one who fixed——.”

“She did?! So the one who made the board you got from Kuzunyu-sensei for getting into the Women’s League is this awesome lady?”

Mio’s tone has changed dramatically as she looks up at the woman, starstruck.

“A lady who can make boards You’re soooo cool!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! I can ’cuz I know Japanese lacquer *urushi* like the back my hand. You don’ hafta have a c*ck to make boards an’ pieces.”

“A co-?”

Mio must never have heard that word before. Haauuu

“S-Speaking of boards and pieces! Do you remember how fast you were answering those questions during our quiz competition after New Year’s, Ai?!”

“Yes, I do! I think I was just lucky with the timing. It was right after Master taught me a whole bunch about them.”

“What’s thisss? Sounds like a fun story, right there.”

The woman finishes off the few remaining swallows of beer in her glass and hands Mio a menu.

“You haven’t had lunch yet, have you, kiddo? Order anythin’ you want. I still haven’t had my fill! This story should pair nicely with more booze.”

She’s going to stay

Be that as it may, this is Mio’s last lunch in Japan.

At least at the very least I want her to be able to enjoy the meal!

In order to secure time for that to happen, Ai starts recounting.

“Let’s see I think it happened on the Saturday after we went on your *tachimori* ceremony, *Sensei*——.”

The story about the one time I, who has neither talent nor determination, was able to outshine the rest.



QUIZ! SHOGI ACADEMY



It all started while we were taking a break during one of our practice sessions.

Master left to go get some food, and Mio saw it as her chance to start a game——.

“Scatter-gories!” Mio announces and the rest of us, Ayano, Charlette and I, all raise our hands and yell.

“Sure!”

“Ranging Rook strategies! I’ll start. Gokigen Central Rook!”

Thump! Mio hits the chess clock timer.

It beeps right away and then starts counting down.

We have 10 seconds of waiting time. Whoever runs out of time first loses, so I answer right away.

“Fourth File Rook!”

Ayano and Charlette jump in just as quickly, giving their answers and hitting the chess clock.

“Ishida Style!”

“Diwect Oposing Wook!”

Ayano is usually so quiet, so her hitting the chess clock that hard makes me jump. Charlette’s is more like a *splat* than a *thud*. That was cute.

But.

“Huh? What’d you say?” Mio asks her.

Charlette’s pronunciation isn’t easy to understand anyway, but it’s really hard to figure out when she’s rushing like this. The winner might come down to the order we answer in! Maybe?!

Ayano interprets for Charlette.

“I believe she said Direct Opposing Rook.”

“In that case Bishop Exchange Fourth File Rook!”

“Huh?! Mio, I already said Fourth File Rook!!” I point out, surprised she would make that mistake so soon.

But, Mio confidently answers, “What you said was the regular Fourth File Rook, right? Normal and Fourth File are completely different strategies.”

Does that really count?!

“Buuut! Well, ummm”

“Don’t look now, but you’re running out of time.”

“Ah! Okay then, Right Fourth File Rook!”

Yes! I said it before running out of time!

But that relief doesn’t last.

Mio and Ayano yell at the same time, “OUT!”

Huh?

I lost?

“Whaaat? B-But, why?!”

“Ai-tan, wose?”

It looks like Charlette and I are the only ones who don’t understand. But, but, you have to move the Rook over, so that makes it a Ranging Rook strategy, doesn’t it? It is, right?

Ughhh! I don’t get it! Whhhhhy?

Master comes back just then.

“I got everyone some juice and snacks Um, what’re you using the chess clock for?”

“We’re playing scatter-gories! I started it!”

“A chess clock with a listing game? That’s pretty creative,” says Master, sounding impressed as he puts the bag of snacks down on the table.

I tug at his sleeve and ask him, “Master, Master! Right Fourth File Rook is Ranging Rook, isn’t it?!”

“Actually, it’s classified as Static Rook.”

“But, BUT!! You move the Rook! The Rook stays in the same spot for Static strategies. That’s why they’re called *static*!”

“You’re on the right track, but the correct way to think about it is if the Rook moves to the left side of the board from your point of view, it’s Ranging Rook. If it stays on your right, it’s static.”

“Uwheeee?”

It moves, but it’s still called *static*? That doesn’t make any sense.

Am I just not smart enough to understand?

“So if you move the Rook to the fourth column to the right of the King, that’s Right Fourth File Rook, and the third column is called Sleeve Rook. Both are static strategies.”

“Sweeb Wook?”

Charlette looks confused. I don’t think I’ve heard of that one before either.

“It’s a strategy where the Rook moves one square to the left of its starting point. It slides in close, just like the sleeve of a shirt. That’s how it got its name,” Ayano explains without missing a beat.

It’s so nice having someone as smart as she is around at times like this. Are people like her called *intellectuals*?

But! I’m still upset!

“Hph It’s all so confusing!”

“I agree that it’s hard to tell the difference between Static Rook and Ranging Rook strategies at first.”

“He-hee! You fell right into my trap, Ai! I made you think of Fourth File Rook styles when I brought up the Bishop Exchange!”

“Th-That’s a ploy! You used it because you knew you couldn’t win fair and square!”

“A Women’s League player falling for an amateur’s ploy? Isn’t that embarrassing?”

“Mrghhh! Th-This is scatter-gories! Shogi strength has nothing to do with it!”

Shogi or a quiz, I hate losing.

It’s important to get rid of that pain and move on. The only way to avoid feeling more pain is to win the next one. Complaining about the last loss gets you nowhere.

BUT! I can’t accept losing like this!

“Well It’s true that players don’t need this kind of knowledge to succeed so long as they have enough skill.”

“See?! Master agrees with me!!”

“That being said, all Women’s League players are strong. That’s a given. It’s the work outside of matches that they need to be able to do.”

“Outside of matches.....? What work?”

“Any ideas?” Master asks us, but we are all drawing blanks.

That is until Ayano’s hand shoots into the air and she answers, “Promoting Shogi.”

“That’s right! Nicely done, Ayano!”

“Th-Thank you!”

“Just like she said: promoting and popularizing Shogi Basically it’s their job to correctly pass along Shogi techniques and knowledge.”

Master then looks right at me as he says a little strictly, “If it’s Shogi strength people want, there are computers for that nowadays. It’s more important than ever to be able to entertain Shogi fans at the same time. Helping to make that happen is the most meaningful work a Shogi player can do. So you’ll need to know these kinds of things.”

“..... Okay, I’ll try harder”

“And not just the types of strategies, either. You’ll need to know all sorts of things, from the history of the Shogi world to the cultural norms. What ground

does a pro have to stand on if the fans know more than the pro does?”

That does make sense.

Mio says, “Shogi history? So, I have to name all the past Meijins in order?”

“Ha-ha-ha. If you can, that would be ideal, but don’t worry about that. I know the first Meijin, Soukei Ohashi, but I can’t remember who came after him.”

I cut in to ask Master, “Then, then, what kinds of things do I have to know?”

“For example all the Shogi titles.”

“Like Ryuo and Meijin? Those titles?”

“Yeah. Did you know there’s an order to them?”

Charlette tilts her head, which looks kind of silly because she’s stuffed her mouth full of snacks that Master brought.

“Owdew?”

“In other words, each title has a rank.”

Master nods at Ayano’s explanation and starts counting on his fingers.

“The pro leagues have seven titles: Ryuo, Meijin, Crown, Throne, Monarch, King and Emperor, in that order.”

I know that. I can say all of them.

“The Women’s League has six, with Queen and Women’s Throne being the highest. After that comes Women’s Legend, Empress, Women’s King and then Yamashiro Ouka.”

Of course, I can say all the Women’s titles, too.

But I’m not too sure about the order after Queen and Women’s Throne.

It looks like Ayano is the only one who knew. But listening to Master list all thirteen titles like it was nothing is what impresses me the most.

Hearing us say wow must have felt good, because Master keeps on explaining, but more like he’s bragging now.

It’s one of the ways we can tell when he’s in a good mood. So cute ≡

“By the way, Go titles have a rank as well. The top is *Kisei*, meaning *Grand*

Master, which is followed by *Meijin* and *Honinbou*. Altogether they're called the *Grand Triad*."

"Grand Triad. That sounds like a constellation!" Mio says.

But Ayano corrects her using no time, "You're talking about the Summer Triangle"

Just, wow. I'm seriously impressed how smart she is.

"Even among the Shogi titles, *Ryuo* and *Meijin* are treated differently. For instance, one of the requirements for amateurs to be given titles is a certificate with not only the Shogi Association Chairman's signature, but the signatures of the *Ryuo* and the *Meijin* as well."

"Oh yeah! My certificate had your autograph on it, *Kujyuru-sensei*!"

"So that's part of your work, Master?"

"Yeah. There are days when I hole up inside the association's office for hours and hours, right? It's because I have to sign about 200 certificates every month. Those days are rough"

"So that's what you're doing! I thought you were having fun talking with the young woman who's been working there this whole time."

"Young woman? Are you talking about Ms. Oga?"

That's exactly who I'm talking about.

Chairman Tsukimitsu's secretary, the office lady who's always in the know, that Sasari Oga.

"All she does is pressure me. *Writing that poorly reflects badly on the chairman's handwriting as well, so please write as though your life depends on it.* You know how scary it is hearing her say that? Worse, she sighs every time my signature doesn't meet her expectations and says point-blank, *Haaaaa* *The chairman and the Meijin are busy people, but it looks like I'm going to have to ask them to sign yet another certificate* It's hell on earth."

"But she's beautiful, isn't she?"

"I can't deny that But I'm still going to stay as far away from her as possible!"

Staaaaare

“Wh-What’s that look for? What kind of a guy do you think I am, Ai?”

“Am I allowed to say it right now?”

“..... No. Stop. Not another word, please,” Master begs on all fours.

See? I knew something was going on.

Mio pokes the back of Master’s head.

“Hey, hey, Kujiyuru-sensei? You said there’s an order to the titles, right? What’s the reason for it?”

“History, status and a few other valid reasons go into it, but at the end of the day, it comes down to this.”

Master rubs his fingers together. So, basically, *money*.

“For real?!”

“Money talks In Shogi, titles talk. That’s the way it is.”

“Well, pros get paid. Pros exist because there’s money involved.”

Mio sounds shocked and Ayano grimaces while Master tells us about the relationship between professionals and money in the Shogi world.

“As far as the sponsors are concerned, they’re paying more than the others, so they expect the title they paid for to have a higher status. Since I’m receiving money from the title that they paid for, I have to protect its reputation.”

“That’s how all professionals think! My mother always told me that. At our inn, we make sure that guests receive the best service according to the price of the room!”

“Ai, can you remember which customers are staying in which rooms?”

“The *yukata* robes in each room have a different pattern. So we know who is who right away even if we see them outside of their rooms!”

“Wooow! That’s how you do it That’s so much easier than matching names to numbers! You guys are so smart!”

Mio sounds surprised and impressed at the same time.

I don't want to reveal too much, but we also have different numbers of stripes on the *obi* sashes and make the sandal straps different colors, too.

"Oh, but I know all of our regular customers by heart and try my best to remember everyone who stays at the inn."

"I see, I see You've lived that way ever since you were tiny, so that's why your memory is so good. Yep, it all makes sense"

Master forces himself to smile at the fact that Mio is more impressed with memory tricks than how professionals conduct themselves and then gets us back on topic.

"We got a bit sidetracked, but what I'm trying to say is that as people who will be involved in Shogi as players while working to help promote it, you'll need to have a good grasp of the basic history and culture of our sport. Retired pros have gone out of their way to teach Women's League players all about that in seminars before."

Seminars?! St-Studying

"Th-That sounds hard I wonder if I can remember everything? I can usually remember Shogi formations and customers' faces, but I'm not good at studying Haauuu"

"You'll be just fine, Ai! I'll help you!" Ayano says and takes my hand to encourage me. "I I'm so far behind when it comes to Shogi skill that I can't do much for you during our practice sessions. So think of this as my way of paying you back, even just a little bit, for all you've done for me"

Master then adds with a smile, "Do you like this kind of stuff, Ayano?"

"Yes! I like Shogi history and literature more than playing Shogi itself!"

"You do?"

"Actually, I would like to follow in Big Sister Machi's footsteps and work as a Shogi journalist someday! I don't have much talent, so"

Ayano's older sister apprentice is Machi Kugui-*sensei*, the player who has the Yamashiro Ouka title. She also works as a journalist under the pen name "Mato," because the Chinese character for it can also be pronounced as "kugui." Both of them are birds!

Her idol has so many talents, but Ayano is so timid.

That's when Master—— “Whoa! You're incredible, Ayano!” cheers her on with a big smile.

He's all for it.

“Knowing what you want to do at your age and actually working toward it? I knew that you took things seriously, but I had no idea you were so proactive!”

“Whaaat? B-But Whenever I bring this up, I always get told *giving up on joining the Women's League while in elementary school is spineless* that I should concentrate more on Shogi”

“Of course, I think you're too young to give up on joining the Women's League.”

“Haauuu”

“But if there's something else that you want to do more, there's no need to force yourself to join. Honestly, I think it's shameful that adults don't understand that.”

“K-Kuzuryu-sensei Thank you so much!”

Ayano removes her glasses so she can wipe the happy tears out of her eyes.

“I I've never received encouragement like this before You've made me so so happy!”

Isn't that great, Ayano?!

Master would never shoot down someone's dream no matter what! That's just like him!

“Ohhhh? Ayano, your cheeks are turning pink! Could it be?”

“P-Please, don't tease me like that, Mio! I-I U-Ummmm I'm not Haauuu”

Isn't that great, Ayano?

Master gives girls the wrong idea no matter what the situation is That's just like him

“..... How come Ayano gets all the encouragement? No fair”

Ayano, like Machi Kugui, might be a surprisingly strong rival The type that can hit a weak spot even though they aren't trying Yep, she's dangerous.

"Masta≡"

And the most dangerous of them all is her. Charlette

"Cha, Cha knows what Cha want to be!"

"You do? You already know what you want to be in the future, huh? Okay Charlette, what do you want to be when you grow up?"

"Cha, bwide!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha! That's right. You're going to be my bride, aren't you?"

"Cha lubs Masta≡"

"I love you too, Charlette!"

That back and forth just now, huuuuuuh?!

"Mrgh! Nrghhhhh!"

"K— Kujyuru-*sensei*! Stop, stop! Ai's getting jealous enough to explode!"

"O-Ooops That's right. Ummm, what were we talking about?"

"The history and culture of the Shogi world! How could you forget?!"

"Aha-ha. Remembering is impossible for him, Mio. Master only thinks about cute girls."

"A-Ai? Are you angry?"

"No, I'm not angry. Why would you think I'm angry? Have you done anything that could possibly make me angry?"

Master says that I'm the most important one to him because I'm his first apprentice, but isn't he treating Charlette like she's the most important one to him? Is that part of the Ryuo's work? Is it? That liar, liar, liar, liarliarliarliarliarliarliarliarliarliarliarliar

Ayano suddenly yells, "K-Kuzuryu-*sensei*! How did you study?!"

"O-Oh Yeah. Master Kiyotaki taught me while I was his live-in apprentice.

Big Sis hates that kind of thing and skipped out a lot, though.”

“Cha, stwudying makes Cha sweepy”

Charlette stretches out on the floor.

Master sounds a little disappointed.

“That happens. Plenty of kids love Shogi as a game but aren’t interested at all in the culture behind it”

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s me for sure!”

“Then why don’t we make studying a quiz game?!”

“Quiz?”

Ayano nods at us.

“Yes! The association hosts the Shogi Culture Test every year. I’ve used questions from that test to quiz myself and have fun while learning.”

“Oooh! That does sound like fun!! Nice, Ayano!”

“I can just see all of you having your own quiz tournament!”

Me too! I want to play!

I don’t think I could make it very long studying all by myself, but getting to talk about Shogi and learn at the same time would be so much better! Quiz shows are really popular right now at school, too!

“Alright then” I’ve got it!”

Master slaps his knees after hearing Ayano’s suggestion.

“Let’s make this into a title match!”

“..... Huh?”

So that’s how Master turned our break-time game into a *title match*, but

None of us had any idea it would turn out like that.

Me, Master and everyone else couldn’t have imagined it.



And so, a few days later at the Kansai Shogi Association.

We reserve the multipurpose room on the fourth floor for our *title match*.

“Answer the questions correctly!” Master says really loudly.

“And the Shogi world will come into view!” Ayano answers, just as loud.

“A brand-new title! The Shogi Quiz King League!” They say at the same time to finish.

Wow, they must have practiced again and again to get the timing right! I knew I had to keep an eye on Ayano☆

“The big day has finally arrived! It’s time to unravel many mysteries of the Shogi world right here, at the Shogi Quiz King League! I, Yaichi Kuzuryu, will be providing commentary and analysis as my assistant, Ayano Sadatou, asks the questions!”

“Who will receive the honor of being the first ever Shogi Quiz King?!”

“For the title! Make your move!”

Master pumps his fist in the air and says something like what those quiz show hosts on Sunday afternoons say. By the way, the Sunday standard in the Kuzuryu Shogi family goes morning Shogi broadcast → lunch → quiz shows.

“That name is very straightforward, isn’t it?!”

“Easy to understand, too!”

Mio and I argued for *Shogi Squares* and *Quiz: 9x9 Grid*, but this is the name we all eventually agree on.

All of us worked hard on the decorations, so the room looks great, but——.

“..... Just what is this supposed to be? I’m only here because I was told there’d be a new title match Don’t tell me it’s this wannabe TV show?”

“Agreed. Depending on your answer all your heads will be on a pike.”

We invited Ten-chan and Sora-sensei to be contestants, but they don’t look excited at all. Uwhee?

“Cha, Cha’s hwappy to see pwincess and Ten-tan!”

“O-Okay”

“Well, I’m not happy about it!” Ten-chan says.

Sora-sensei looks a little unsure after seeing Charlette's innocent smile, but Ten-chan still sounds angry. Master steps in.

“Don’t be so hard on them, you two. This is a new title, so it will mean so much more if everybody’s here competing for it, don’t you think?”

“Mean more? Does that mean there’s a prize if I win?”

“The honor of being the first ever Shogi Quiz King.”

“I don’t care about that! Drop dead already, stupid!”

Sora-sensei throws the fan she had in her hand right in Master’s face.

She only just promoted to the Sub League’s 3-*dan* division and will play in it this spring, so she’s as high-strung as a bear coming out of hibernation.

“Besides, I’ve got the pain of defending a real Women’s Title coming up! I don’t have time to play along with your game, pipsqueaks!!”

“I know, Big Sis! I can relate because I’m a title holder, too!”

In order to convince Sora-sensei to stay Master uses the ace in the hole!

“So, of course, the winner won’t be leaving empty-handed! And guess what! They’re going to receive a trip to one of Japan’s best hot springs as a bonus prize!”

“Hot spring?”

We kept that detail a secret, so everyone is surprised.

But it looks like Ten-chan figured it out.

“Wait, don’t tell me——.”

“That’s right! The winner of the Shogi Quiz King Title Match will be going to an inn on the north coast that hosted a Ryuo Title Match, the Hinatsuru! They were gracious enough to donate an all-expense-paid voucher.”

“That’s one night for free!”

Yep, that’s right! I talked to my mother and she said that because I didn’t come home for New Year’s, now might be a good time!

“You’d just be going home!”

“I figured that was the case,” say Mio and Ten-chan at the exact same time.

Sora-sensei, on the other hand, still looks angry.

“Absurd I’ve already been to enough inns with hot springs to last a lifetime for my title matches. Why would I want to go all the way to the Noto Peninsula to go to another one on my day off? I’ll be seeing myself out, thank you.”

Her chair squeaks across the floor as Sora-sensei stands up. Ten-chan follows her without saying a word.

Ohhh?

Are you really sure you want to go?

“By the way, it’s a pair voucher for two people overnight.”

The moment I say so.

“..... Pair?”

Sora-sensei and Ten-chan echo me: just that one word.

Master jumps back into TV host mode with vigor.

“And there you have it! So, who is going to be the first ever Shogi Quiz King?”

“Me!”

“Cha, Cha’s gonna be a twitle hooda!”

Now then

I have something to ask Master before we go any further.

“Master! Master! If I win, will you come with me?!”

“Huh? Are you sure you want me to come?”

“Yes! You’ve been looking after me ever since I came to Osaka, so I’d like to do something to pay you back for all your hard work!”

“A-Ai!”

Tears started leaking out of Master’s eyes.

“You just made my day I never knew getting a hot spring getaway from an apprentice would make me so happy to be a Master!”

“So, you’ll come with me?!”

“Of course I will! The Ryuo title was on the line last time I was there, so I didn’t have any chance to enjoy it!”

“Yaaay! I’ll scrub your back for you, Master!”

“Huuuh?! I-I don’t think that’s such a good idea”

“I’ll have a bath towel on, and the *onsen* water flows right into a private bath in the room, so there shouldn’t be any problems. No one else will come! It’ll be just us!”

“That’s not what I was talking about”

“We live in the same apartment anyway, so it’s okay! I’ll take care of the cooking, your post-bath massage, everything! I’ll be with you the whole time we’re at the inn!”

“Umm I know it’s just Master and apprentice vacationing together, but that might be a little much”

“So no?”

I look up at him at the perfect angle and plead with my eyes. Master goes back and forth for a few seconds and then.

“*Sigh* Still clingy, even as a member of the Women’s League. Just this once, got it?”

“Yaay! Yaay! I’ll fill my duty as your apprentice≡”

Clatter, clatter, clatter!!

I look around and see that Sora-sensei and Ten-chan are back in their chairs.

“Hey, lolicon. That’s enough of this sickening conversation with that grade schooler. Start the quiz already.”

“Huh? I thought you were leaving, Big Sis.”

“What? Who’s leaving? This quiz is going to be trash, so who better to start it than the trash lolicon, right Trash?”

“You didn’t have to call me a lolicon just now, did you? And what’s with the three *trash’s*?”

“That was the most lolicon conversation I’ve ever heard! Record it and play it back, why don’t you?!”

Once Sora-sensei finishes lecturing Master, she explains her reasoning for staying.

“It’s my duty as an older sister apprentice to prevent a certain younger brother apprentice from bringing a little girl on a lolicon-themed hot spring vacation. Be grateful, lolicon.”

Stare

I give Sora-sensei the evil eye. Stare

“Wh-What? You got something to say, pipsqueak?”

“I do.”

Of course, I do. Quite a bit.

“You seem to be judging me, Sora-sensei! So, what are you planning to do if you win the voucher, huh?!”

“I I’ll give it to Master Kiyotaki and Keika.”

“You know Keika will be nice and pretend that she’s sick!! Just like she did when we went to Awaji Island!”

“H-Huh? What are you talking about, pipsqueak? Keika went with us, remember?”

Sora-sensei looks over to Mio and Ayano for backup.

“Yep, Keika came.”

“She did. Keika drove the van for us.”

“And got too drunk for her own good at night,” adds Ten-chan while Sora-sensei looks back at me with triumph in her eyes.

“See? Would you stop saying weird things based on your imagination?”

“Tch You’re smooth down there

“I’ve got a pike with your name on it.”

“Th-That’s enough, Big Sis. You too, Ai. Save that energy for the quiz! Now, who wants to go to a hot spring?!”

“ME!”

Everyone’s ready!

“Cha, Cha’dwadder go to da pwool.”

I guess Charlette thinks a pool would be more fun. Then again, hot springs might be a little boring at her age.

“A pair voucher In that case, I think I’ll bring Grandpa with me to show my gratitude for what he does every day,” Ten-chan mumbles.

And Mio jumps at the opportunity. “Hm? You just called him *Grandpa* now didn’t you?”

“O-Of course not! I called him *Grandfather*, as is proper! Perhaps talking so much has damaged your ears?!”

“Huuh? Did you really? Well, either way.”

Ten-chan’s attempt to change the subject fails miserably. Mio grins at her.

Mio likes Ten-chan a lot, so she never lets an opportunity to talk with her slip by. She even teases her, like just now.

But it’s a lot harder for me to start a conversation with Ten-chan. I think Mio is talented like that.

I’m jealous But, at the same time, it feels weird *watching my younger sister apprentice* and *my best friend* growing closer. I should come first for both of them

“Why don’t we get the quizzes started! Ayano, would you explain the rules?”

“Of course, Kuzuryu-sensei. The first to press the button will be able to answer the question. If you think you know the answer, press the button in front of you.”

Ayano looks like she’s enjoying the spotlight as she explains.

Apparently she’s been preparing with Master until late at night for the past

few days to get ready. They're in perfect sync *Darabuchi*.

"So, four eyes is on that side this time"

"Don'tcha think Ayano's glasses are sparkling more than usual"?

Ten-chan and Mio whisper into each other's ears. Yep, they're friends now. Aren't they forgetting someone

Wait! Wh-Why am I thinking about that now?!

Focus, focus!! Win this, and I get to take Master home with me!

That way, it'll be the first of many trips we take to where I grew up and everyone will start thinking: *It looks like Kuzuryu-sensei is going to marry into the Hinatsuru family* That'll get them all out of the way I call it the *Winter Osaka Invasion*.

"The two contestants with the highest scores at the end of the speed round will advance to the finals."

"Do your best to rack up as many points as you can! Now, Ayano, take it away!"

"Question."

Ayano takes a breath, then.

Ding! Someone pressed their button! Even Master doesn't know what to do. Who?!

"That was fast! Ch-Charlette?"

"Meat!"

Bzzzzt. The wrong answer sound. Whew

It seems like Charlette doesn't understand how this works and pressed her button right away.

"Fwhee"?

She's staring blankly up at the Master and he tries his best to explain.

"Um Charlette? This isn't a contest to see who can push the button fastest. It's important to listen to the very end of the question. One more thing. These questions all have something to do with Shogi, so the chances of *meat*

being the answer are pretty small.”

“Waaah!”

“But you were close! Yeah! Really close! Try again on the next one! You’ll get it, so don’t cry, okay? Okay?!”

“Sniffle”

It looks like Master’s desperate attempts to calm Charlette down worked. Phew

Ayano sounds very composed as she adds some more explanation.

“In the event that your answer is incorrect, you can no longer answer that particular question. That’s the only penalty.”

“So, everyone, be assertive like Charlette and get those points!” says Master in a last-ditch attempt to keep Charlette from crying, but it sounds like what he said made Sora-sensei and Ten-chan’s moods even worse.

“Pressing the button before the question is even asked is not being *assertive*.”

“It’s called being stupid.”

“Ai Yashajin! That’s rude and I won’t stand for it! Now let’s try this again. Ayano, the question please!”

“Question. It is said that Japanese nutmeg, also known as *kaya*, is the best type of wood for making Shogi boards. Then, when it comes to making pieces——.”

Ah! I know this!

“Me!”

I hit my button using no time and it dings. That means I can answer, right?! Right?!

“Yes, Ai! The answer is?!”

“Boxwood!”

“Correct!”

Ding-ding-d——ing☆

I did it! I got a point!

“It is said that Japanese nutmeg, also known as kaya, is the best type of wood for making Shogi boards. Then, when it comes to making pieces, what is the best type of wood?” was the full question.”

Ayano reads off the rest of the card and Master adds more details.

“Nutmeg, especially when grown in Miyazaki Prefecture, is classified as the top-tier material for boards, and boxwood, especially Mikurajima Island boxwood, is the best for Shogi pieces! Well done, Ai!”

“E-he-he. Yaaay!”

I received a congratulatory present from Master recently because I joined the Women’s League. He gave me my own board and told me tons about boards and pieces at the same time!

I also got to see a ceremony called *tachimori*, where the lines get put into a board. It was a very memorable experience for me. Actually, I couldn’t forget if I wanted to. How could I ever forget seeing that naked woman wielding a samurai sword

“Maaan Ai is all in

“All that’s in it for her is a trip to her parent’s house, too

Mio and Ten-chan whispered back and forth again, but I’m going to win no matter what they say!

And I REFUSE to lose to Auntie!!

“Hah! Getting so worked up over something so pointless. You pipsqueaks are just kids after all.”

What’s this now?

Sora-sensei is sore about losing to a *pipsqueak*?

“Alright, alright. Would all of you give it a rest and listen up? Let’s move on to the next question!” says Master.

Ayano reads off the next card.

“Question. Bishop Exchange——.”

Ding!

“Whoa! Oh, Ch-Charlette again?!”

“Go ahead and answer.”

“..... Meat?”

Bzzzzt.

“..... Good try, but that’s incorrect!”

“Cha, Cha thought weawwy hward, and Cha’s hungwy.”

“It’s only the second question”

Ten-chan sounds fed up with Charlette.

“Well,” Master begins, “y-you’re hungry, huh? Okay, let’s get some food delivered! I’ll call Twelve and have them send up some beef stew right away.”

“Meat!!”

“It’s like Charlette just used her quiz button to order restaurant food!”

He-he. Mio’s right.

Since she’s very quick on the draw, she might be my biggest obstacle for the speed round.

Meanwhile, it looks like Charlette is completely absorbed in the idea of having beef stew. She’s even humming to herself, “meaty, meaty♪”

Cute, but She’s out of the running for sure.

The real fight starts now!!

“Alright, Ayano, the rest of the question please.”

“Question. Bishop Exchange strategies have three main standards: Climbing Silver, Reclining——.”

Ding!

“Rushing Silver.”

“Cooorrect! Well done, Big Sis!”

S-So fast!!

How could I let Auntie get that one before me?!

“Bishop Exchange strategies have three main standards: Climbing Silver, Reclining Silver, and what?” was the question. That was impressive, Sora-sensei!”

“Questions like that aren’t that hard,” says Auntie, pulling her bangs back with a shrug.

Hmph. What’s with the attitude?

“..... Even though you’re desperate?”

“Huuh? Anyone who spends any time at all studying Shogi could answer that. Besides, the *gin* in *silver* is in my name, so I’m not going to let anyone else get a point when the answer has my name on it. That’s all.”

Sora-sensei is speaking strangely fast for someone trying to act calm.

It seems like I’m not the only one who caught on to that.

“..... For something as simple as you claim, you couldn’t hide the desperation in your voice just now.”

“Now, now, Ten-chan. We don’t get many opportunities to see Sora-sensei sweat like this.”

“She’s never open to begin with.”

“I’m standing right here, pipsqueaks”

“O-Okay, on to the next question!”

Almost like he’s trying to soothe Sora-sensei before she starts breathing fire, Master signals Ayano to read the next one.

“The first Meijin, Soukei Ohashi, has the same *kei* character used for the Knight in his name. In fact, this name was bestowed on him because *his use of Knights was superb*. Who was it that gave it to him?”

Whaaat? Wh-Who could it be?

Who even is Soukei Ohashi? The first Meijin?

What era is he from?

..... Post-war?

“Think hard. The answer might surprise you.”

Ding! Mio answers, completely sure of herself. “I’ve got it! Leo Morimoto!”

“Too bad! Leo Morimoto wasn’t alive yet!”

He’s a veteran actor who loves Shogi very much. He was born at the end of the war, so this happened even before that? Umm, what’s that period called again

No one answers for a few seconds when Charlette hits her button again.

“Not meat!”

“So close!”

“Huh?!”

Th-That was close? THAT?!

“That was really close, Charlette! You got the first letter right!”

“Ah! Here!”

“Yes, Big Sis!”

“..... Nobunaga Oda?”

A few seconds of heavy silence pass after Sora-sensei’s answer. Then——.

Ding-ding-ding-ding-d——ing☆

“Cooorrect!!”

“Huuuuh?! He did?!” Mio yells with her eyes open wide.

She got me! Auntie got the point and the lead!

“Ah! I was thinking that’s what it was, too!”

R-Really, I was! I was just about to press the button!

It doesn’t look like Ten-chan believes it’s true Actually, she looks up at Master with honest curiosity and asks him, “Is there any proof that Nobunaga Oda, a samurai warrior from the late 16th century, was directly involved with Shogi?”

“There sure is. He loved both Shogi and Go, and legend has it that he was watching a match of Go at Honnoji Temple just hours before Mitsuhide Akechi

betrayed him. It gets brought up in *Hikaru no Go*, so we know there's at least some truth to that story."

"Wow!"

"But him giving the first Meijin his name is just a cool myth."

Then you can't make it part of the quiz!

"Then again, it's better to know about these stories even if they're not true! Now then, let's move on to the next question!"

I have to get this point to be even with Auntie, no matter what! Just like in Shogi title matches, it's hard to come back from two points down on quiz shows! Focus!!

"Question."

Ayano picks up the next card and starts. Meanwhile, the stew that Charlette ordered has arrived and she's slurping it down Ngh, but it smells, really, really good

After pausing for dramatic effect, Ayano finally reads the question out loud.

"Kanju Itou is known as the father of Shogi puzzles because of his book, the *Shogi Zukou*. In fact, he had an older brother named Soukan Itou who wrote an equally famous book of Shogi puzzles called?"

I know this one!!

"Me, me, me! *Shogi Musou*!"

"Correct!"

Ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding>☆

"Yaaaay...!!"

"Ai, you now have two points and are even with Sora-sensei! I'm impressed!"

"That was nothing! I won't lose to anyone when it comes to knowledge about Shogi puzzles and Master!"

The second she hears me, ".....Oh? You sound sure of yourself."

Sora-sensei's eyes light up and she asks me a question!

“In that case, what body part does Yaichi wash first in the shower?”

Ding!

I hit the button in front of me using no time. What an easy question.

“Upper left arm!”

Ding-ding-ding-d—ing!

“..... Not bad, pipsqueak.”

“Heh Now, it’s my turn.”

Since I bring Master his change of clothes every single day, I get a glimpse of him in the shower every single day. That wasn’t even a challenge!

I’ll show Auntie what a real question is!

“Huh? What are you two doing? Having your own quiz battle——?”

“What does Master say most in his sleep?!”

“Keika, I can’t eat anymore.”

“That’s right! Master, you *darabuchi*!”

“Why are you dragging me into this?!”

Master, who only has big boobies on his mind even when he’s asleep, sounds confused.

Meanwhile, Ten-chan shrugs with about as much interest as she’s had since we started: zero.

“Better to get dragged in than killed off, right? Still, the way this is going, I would say your death is a foregone conclusion as well.”

“Cha, Cha is fwull now. Da meat was dwishus!”

“You know what, I’m getting pretty full, too.”

“Fwhee? Miow, yew didn’t eat yet?”

Charlette tilts her head.

Then Ten-chan pretends to point at her own chest.

“I haven’t eaten anything either, but I’m getting heartburn nonetheless.”

“Aha-ha. Kinda like

Mio grimaces.

But! I refuse to back down now

“Next question. What was the first Shogi book Yaichi bought with his own money?”

“Takashi Kaneko’s *Yose no Tesuji 200!*”

“Tch Yes.”

“Question! What is the first manga Master ever bought and still secretly reads now?!”

“Kentarou Yabuki-sensei’s *To Love Ru.*”

“That’s right! He reads it after I go to bed!”

“He did the same thing when we were live-in apprentices.”

That early on?! Master, you *dara!!*

“So, Kuzuryu-sensei studies Shogi approaches in the afternoon and how to approach 2-D girls at night!”

“Very studious.”

Master can’t endure Mio and Ayano looking at him and hides his face in his hands.

“Okay Here’s a multiple-choice question.”

Sora-sensei gives Master a sideways glance.

“Which one, out of these three, did Yaichi offer to marry *when he got older* while still in elementary school?”

“Dahhhh——!!”

Head still in his hands, Master curls up on the floor in shame. He looks like a pill bug rolling around like that.

“When Master was in grade school?! So, that means he’s proposed to a girl other than Keika and Charlette?! Master, you *darabuchi*!”

Who in the world was it?! He’s never asked me even once!

Sora-sensei holds up three fingers and points.

“Number one: the high school girl next door with double D’s.”

“*Gaaaasp*—!!”

“Number two: his homeroom teacher with B’s.”

“What do their cup sizes have to do with anything?! They don’t need to know that!”

“Number three: a classmate he was particularly close to, with AAA’s.”

Ayano and Ten-chan tremble after hearing all the options.

“Th-This is incredibly difficult!”

“I agree it’s a difficult question, but not only does it have nothing to do with Shogi, but I would prefer not to know”

Mio sticks out her fingers while talking.

“An older girl next door, a nice teacher he sees every day, or the classmate It could be any one of them Looks like you’ll have to trust your luck on this one, Ai.”

“Nope! I know what type of girl Master likes, so I should be able to figure this out!”

There’s one answer only one.

“Don’t bother! You don’t have to figure it out, okay?!”

“Here, here, herehereherehereherehereherehere—.”

“There’s no board to read, so forget about the *here, here* thing! Don’t take this that seriously!!”

Be quiet, Master.

I ignore the background noise and reach out for the correct answer!

“Master likes older girls with really big boobies. So, the answer is number one! The high school girl with double D cups!!”

“..... Yes!”

“AAAAAARRRRRGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

“Yaaay! Master: no food for a week!”

Fitting, right?

I won't allow anyone to discriminate against girls just because they don't have big boobies Sora-sensei must agree with me because she's kicking Master on the floor. Remembering that day made her angry, I think.

“And, by the way, Yaichi's first crush was his kindergarten teacher, who also happened to have double D's.”

“Oooh? So that's his minimum? Spoiled, isn't he?”

Master's punishment is now two weeks without food.

During this quiz battle I feel like I'm starting to understand Sora-sensei just a little bit more like we're playing Shogi.

Maybe quizzes have more in common with Shogi than I thought!!

“..... The saying goes: *the child is the father to the man*, but to think he had breasts on the brain as young as three years old Sensei, you really are trash”

Ten-chan hides her chest with her arms and glares down at Master even while he whimpers with every one of Sora-sensei's kicks.

“Hmm But I think that's just the way guys are, you know? Kuzuryu-sensei, it doesn't bother me at all that you like the big ones! They mean she's healthy!”

“I-I will pretend I didn't hear any of this conversation!”

“Cha, will Cha get bwig ones, too?”

“Stop, please, I'M BEGGING YOOOOOOOU!!”

We won't.

“Okay, it's my turn to ask a question! Where is Master ticklish?!”

“Behind his knees.”

“Ngh That's correct!”

“Question. What phrase has Yaichi been secretly preparing since elementary school for the interview when he becomes Meijin in the future?”

“B-B-But Ginko, you promised you’d never tell anyone about that! You’re breaking your promise, stop, stop STOP!”

“Playing Shogi hasn’t been easy. In fact, I went through some difficult times. But, just when I thought my spirit would break, I asked the Little Kuzuryu inside my heart what he wanted to do. And he gave me this answer every time: I want to be the Meijin!”

“..... Yes.”

“DAAAAHHHH!! How do you know that——?!!”

I found out a long time ago that Keika would show me Master’s old albums and notebooks if I’d pester her enough. That question was easy. I’ve known for months and months.

But I guess the other girls hadn’t heard that before.

“Kujyuru-sensei He’s been having those daydreams for a long time

“K-Kuzuryu-sensei I admire that kind of commitment!”

“Four eyes You’re kinder than I thought

Now! Here comes the moment of truth!

“It’s my turn! I’m going to give you the hardest question I know! What word does Master search the most on his computer?!”

“*Cleavage.*”

“Nrghh That’s correct!”

“Kill me, pleeeeeeeaaaaase!!”

I was sure I would be the only one to know the answer because I’m the only one who regularly checks >Master’s laptop in secret Auntie is a worthy opponent!

Exactly what I would expect from my rival!

“Not bad for only living with him for a little over a year, pipsqueak

“And you haven’t lived with Master for almost 10 years for nothing, Auntie!”

“Just so we’re clear, I still know plenty more secrets about Yaichi.”

“And I have 108 notebooks in my *Classified Master Manual* series!”

“Ugh Please, kill me Put me out of my misery!” Master begs like some human-animal fusion experiment gone wrong in a science fiction movie.

Ten-chan pokes him with the tip of her shoe a few times.

“I believe our perverted Master will die before this competition is settled.”

“Ayano! Kujyuru-sensei’s hit points hit zero! No, it’s in the red by now! What are Ai and Sora-sensei’s scores?!”

“Th-They are even at this point! It’s impossible to guess who will win!” answers Ayano right away. She’s been fulfilling her duty as the scorekeeper this whole time.

Meanwhile, Charlette keeps playing with her spoon, licking off the last bits of beef stew as she talks.

“Bwoth ob yew know sooo much avout Masta!”

“Actually, this is never going to end, is it?”

“I agree. It’s a stalemate. How shall we handle this?”

Mio and Ten-chan bring up a good point, but——.

“W-Well Wh-Why don’t we say that it’s a tie And Big Sis and Ai will go to the hot spring together?”

“Absolutely not!”

“I refuse!”

“Should’ve figured”

Master goes back into his pill bug position on the floor after Sora-sensei and I reject his suggestion at the same time.

The one who has something ready to break this repetition draw is——.

“Kuzuryu-sensei.”

“Hm? What is it, Ayano?”

“I still have one question card remaining. Could we use it to decide the

winner?”

“Oh! That one Sure!”

Now that he has some human dignity back, Master stands up on his own legs and tells us.

“Big Sis! Ai!”

“Yes, double D?”

“Quiet, cleavage!”

“Stop that, will you?!”

We won’t.

“Would both of you please get a hold of yourselves?” Ayano couldn’t ignore it anymore and warns us. Then, in a refined voice, she continues. “The winner will never be decided at this rate. I would like both of you to agree that whoever answers this question correctly will be victorious. If no one claims the point, I propose that there will be no winner.”

“.....”

In amateur tournaments, the judge may declare *no winner* when repetition draws and stalemates happen.

Ayano’s suggestion, that both of us lose, is easy to get behind because we are Shogi players.

“..... Okay. If that’s what you think is best, Ayano”

“That sounds like the only option”

Both participants agree, so it’s settled.

Whether I’m right or wrong This will be the last question!

“..... Alright, here it is! This time, it’s not a speed question, so please listen all the way to the end.”

Ayano’s words bounce around the quiet room like waves going across a pond.

J-Just what question is she going to ask?

Shogi history? Strategy? Or——.

“The question is about Shogi Titles.”

Ayano starts quietly reading off the card.

This turns out to be the question.

“The professional titles ranked in order of status are Ryuo, Meijin, Crown, Throne, Monarch, King and Emperor Then, what is the fifth-highest ranking title for Women’s Shogi?”

Mio yells the second Ayano finishes.

“Oh, man! Kujoyuru-*sensei* just told us that the other day, didn’t he?!”

Yes, back when we were playing scatter-gories!

“H-He sure did! Umm, it was Uwee?! What was the order?! I can’t remember!”

I thought I had the advantage, but The order gets murkier the lower down the list I go!

Actually, Sora-*sensei* might have the edge because she has Women’s Titles!!

Aghhh! I don’t know!!

“It’s finer details like this that tend to be the hardest to remember when someone asks for them later on”

“Cha, Cha dwoesn’t hab any idea.”

Ten-chan and Charlette tilt their heads. The answer is something we should know, but no one is really sure. This is a toughie!

Agh! I’ve got it down to two titles, but I don’t remember which is which!!

“..... Thinking time is over.” Ayano announces. That was quick! “Your answers, please!”

Sora-*sensei* says—“It’s Yamashiro Ouka.”

As I say—“..... Woman’s King!”

Our answers are different!

At least now both of us can’t be right.

Which means there will be a winner and a loser, or both of us are wrong

Ayano presses her glasses up to her face and confirms.

“..... Final answers?”

“Final answer!”

“..... The correct answer is”

Ayano looks down and pauses to build up the tension. Her skills as a quiz host have gone up quite a bit in just one day. Unlike Master who only thinks about cleavage, she’s focused on the quiz.

Okay! The answer is?!

“..... Women’s King!”

What?!

I-It is really?!

“Eeeeeek! Yaaaay——!!”

“That was awesome, Ai!”

“Ai-tan, yew da Shwogi Quiz Kwing!”

“I’m not jealous, not one bit”

The other girls are all happy for me.

I’ll even overlook Ten-chan’s last comment, for now anyway

“The Women’s Titles in order are as follows: Queen and Women’s Throne are equal at the top, followed by Women’s Legend, Empress, then Women’s King and finally Yamashiro Ouka.”

“Ngh Yes, now I remember. I knew it was one of those two But Machi, the current Yamashiro Ouka, just seems to be a step above Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, so I mistook her title to be more prestigious than Women’s King”

“So that’s what you were thinking, Big Sis I get where you’re coming from, though.”

Master, back to being human again, adds a comment before Ayano asks him to sum up the competition as a whole.

“Kuzuryu-sensei, would you provide a review session for our contestants?”

“Sure thing I feel like Ai Hinatsuru’s drive to learn as much about Shogi as she could now that she’s part of the Women’s League shone through in the end and was ultimately the difference.”

It’s true that I won today.

But that’s only because Master told me the answer a few days ago. I was lucky, nothing more.

If this same question comes up next year will I be able to answer it?

I have to become a Women’s League player who can. I must, I know it.

“On the other hand, I feel like Big Sis looks down on Women’s Titles just a bit because her sights are set on joining the pros. Am I right?”

“..... Yes, you are. I’m reflecting on my mindset right now.”

Sora-sensei openly accepts her defeat.

I have a feeling that this right here is the key to her strength.

It was just a quiz battle, but Even just for a moment, getting to face her at her best helped me understand a little better.

And that’s——.

“Without any further ado, I officially declare Ai Hinatsuru to be the first ever Shogi Quiz King! Congrats on your first title!”

“Thank you very much! Oh, and Master.”

“Yeah?”

“Question.”

“Yes?”

“Out of the next three, where are you about to go and what are you about to do?”

“Huh? We’re going to the hot spr——.”

“Number one: a waterfall.”

“..... Waterfall?”

“Where you’ll stand under the pure water and drive all the boobies and older girls out of your mind.”

“Huh? L-Like one of those purification ceremonies? B-But it’s the middle of winter——.”

“Number two: a temple.”

I cut Master off and continue with the quiz.

“Where you will practice *zazen* meditation for a week without sleep to get rid of all impure thoughts. A high school girl with double D cups won’t catch your eye. You’ll never cry or laugh again.”

“Hey, hey, hey! There’s nothing wrong with admiring a girl like that from a distance——.”

So he does look at them.

“Number three: an interrogation room.”

“Interro-?!”

“As it seems you’re still hiding a lot from me, I’ll be taking this opportunity to pry it all out of you. Yes, you will spew every secret until there’s nothing left.”

I hold up three fingers and press him for an answer.

“Now, Master. Where are you going?”

“Uhh Wh-Where? Well I really don’t want to go to any of those——.”

“If you don’t know, why don’t I give you the answer?”

“Huh? Big Sis?!”

“It’s, *all three*.”

DING-DING-DING-DING-D————ING☆

“Wha-?! Huuuh?! For real?!”

Yes, for real. Of course, you are.

The other members of the Grade Schooler Practice Group watch Master fail to

comprehend his situation and chat amongst themselves.

“Awww. So much for the hot springs

“It doesn’t look like anyone will be using that voucher

“But, at least *Sensei* will be forgetting about his daily life for a while
Though that depends on whether he survives or not.”

“Masta gets ta go aww ober Japawn? Dat swounds wike fun!”

“Yeah, that sounds like fun to me, too! I got to go to Minoo Falls on a field trip.”

“I’m fond of the Otowa Waterfalls at Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto. Drinking from them is said to have benefits.”

“So long as we’re talking about waterfalls, Kobe’s Nunobiki Falls is recognized as one of Japan’s *Three Great Waterfalls*. Poems dating back to the Heian Era reference it. Nunobiki is a must.”

Sora-sensei listens to their suggestions and then grabs Master’s shoulders hard enough sink her fingernails into his skin.

“Isn’t that great, Yaichi? Just think of all the waterfalls you’re going to see.”

“Great?! No, this isn’t great at all! Waterfalls are lethal in February!!”

I won the quiz battle with Sora-sensei.

But, winning taught me that I can't go easy on Master, ever! I need to be just as stern with him as Sora-sensei!

So much so that he wishes he were dead!! Master you *darabuchi*!!

* This story is a novelized version of the Drama CD included with the special release version of *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done! Book 7*.

UNFINISHED LETTERS.
THE LAST GRADE SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 4



UNFINISHED LETTERS: THE LAST GRADE

SCHOOLER PRACTICE GROUP SESSION PART 4



“How ‘bout that! You pulled it out, eh, Ai? That’s not just a stroke a’ luck!”

Sensei listens to my story all the way to the end Uzu Tentsuji really does sound impressed.

But that doesn’t make me very happy.

“So, tell me. What happened to Yaichi? You girls obviously locked him up and experimented, yeah? Tell me every last detail.”

“U-Umm In the end, I just didn’t cook for Master, so”

“Bummer. If it’d been me, I’d have given him a *full course*, if you catch my drift. Lemme know next time, ‘kay? You better! That’s a promise, got it?!”

Sensei is strangely insistent.

“But, I gotta tell you, Shogi catchin’ fire recently’s got me green with envy. Go’s got tons of players all over the world, but there’s a real shortage of c*cks playin’ here in Japan. Maybe I’ll host my own quiz show.”

“For Go?”

Mio doesn’t just tilt her head, but leans all the way to the side as she looks across the table at the drunken board master.

“Go, right? Huh? I think I’ve seen this lady somewhere, but I just can’t remember exactly where.”

“..... Probably on TV after Sunday morning Shogi or in the newspaper in the same column as Shogi news because that’s where they put Go news, too.”

“Um? Could you just tell me, Ai?”

Mio gives me a blank look.

I don’t blame her. It’s hard to make the connection

So, I say Tentsuji-*sensei*'s other name.

"She holds one of Go's Grand Triad, the Honinbou title. In other words, she's a professional Go player and a titleholder Shumai Honinbou-*sensei*."

"Sh-Shumai Honinbou?! For real?! She's like ... the top of the top in Go!! You're saying this potty-mouthed drunk lady is SHUMAI HONINBOU?!"

"Bwah-ha-ha-ha! Sure am. I'm the first woman to ever hold the title, the one and only Shumai Honinbou. Address me as Shumai-*sensei*," she says and takes a very satisfying gulp of beer. I see Ayano trying to stop her out of the corner of my eye, but she gives up halfway through.

Meanwhile, Charlette keeps saying, "Cha lubs chumai!" and gobbling down more of the dumplings that share the same name.

"So tell me, Mio, you got a trouser snake of your own?"

"Trou-?"

Ayano slides over to protect Mio from the woman so drunk she thinks everyone with a short haircut must be a boy.

"M-Mio is a girl! We came to see her off today because she's moving overseas!"

"Bummer"

Shumai-*sensei*'s shoulders slump. Whether it's because Mio is moving away or because she's a girl, I have no idea And Mio looks like she still can't believe the mistake happened at all.

"A snake?"

Please, don't ask!

"Oh, that reminds me. You know a lot about Shogi boards, right Shumai-*sensei*?"

"Sure do. There's lots to know 'bout board sports, but when it comes to boards and c*cks, I'm the expert."

"..... Okay!"

It seems like Mio chose to ignore that last one.

“You see, I was going to bring camellia oil with me to clean my Shogi boards when I get over there, but they said I can’t bring the oil on the plane. How am I supposed to keep the boards clean if I don’t have that oil?”

“Camellia oil??”

No one saw Shumai-*sensei*’s answer coming.

“Who needs that fancy-schmancy stuff? Olive oil’ll work fine.”

“Olive oil?!”

“If you don’t got that, use milk.”

“MILK?!”

“The important thing is to gently wipe it with somethin’ weak and oily. Too strong, and the lacquer’ll start peelin’ off. When that happens, you’ve got no choice but to resurface the whole thing.”

I couldn’t believe my ears at first, but Even though she’s drunk, Shumai-*sensei*’s explanation is logical and convincing at the same time.

She really did grow up in a family of board masters.

Just like how a player’s fingers instinctually know what the best moves are without thinking, I think the board masters’ instincts must be able to overcome tons of alcohol.

“Out of everything I’ve tried, the best stuff I found for cleaning boards is lube.”

“Lube? Like lotion? One of those skincare products?”

“Those’ve too much extra junk mixed in. Simple, slippery oil is what you want. Go snoop around your parent’s bedroom and you’ll see.”

“???”

What is she talking about?

“Haauuu” Ayano is blushing for some reason. Does she know?

“Ooh? Ayanyo? Yew’re aww wed?”

“I-I have no idea! I don’t have a single clue what she’s talking about!! That most certainly did not appear in one of the *grown-up* books that Big Sister

Machi lent me!!!”

Denying without being asked? She knows And whatever it is, I bet it’s dirty
.....

Mio doesn’t sound convinced.

“But, but. Then why did the book say to use camellia oil?”

“Shogi as we know it came about in the 1700s, and camellia oil was all they had to work with back in those days. Heck, Japan didn’t drink cow milk for another 100 years after that.”

“Oh, I gotcha!”

“Go and Shogi techniques and rules have evolved over the years, and so have boards and pieces. Aesthetic advances Bringin’ in more c*cks can only help in the long run.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. What an eye-opener!”

Mio nods a few times, so I guess that explanation makes sense to her. Then she leans over to whisper in my ear.

“..... I thought she wasn’t all there upstairs at first, but it turns out she really is who she says she is!”

“..... Yes. You wouldn’t believe how polite she is when she isn’t drunk, though.”

Her behavior is one thing, but even the way she speaks is much more refined.

The problem is that Shumai-sensei is only sober for a few days a year, but it’s not when she has Go matches. It’s when she performs *tachimori* ceremonies and uses a samurai sword to put lines on a board She wasn’t drunk when Ten-chan and I saw her, but she wasn’t dressed either

“So, Shumai-sensei, what are you doing at the airport today?”

“You don’t know either, Ai?!”

Mio looks at me in shock.

“I don’t Shumai-sensei was already drunk when we came inside. She saw me and yelled: *join me fer’a round!*”

“Because I heard about Shumai Honinbou from Big Sister Machi, I was excited for a chance to speak with her at first. She said Shumai-sensei was an *amazing person* and I had been wanting a chance to meet her,” Ayano tells her before forcing an empty smile with a “Heh” However, I had no idea this is what she meant by *amazing*

“Cha, Cha got ta eat Chwinese and habe fun!”

Charlette has eaten almost all the ridiculous amount of Chinese food on the table by herself.

“Truth is, one of the TV networks in Tokyo called me up,” Sensei answered after a loud burp.

TV?

“I’ve been shut up in my workshop outside Nara recently, so takin’ a plane’s much faster than hoppin’ on the bullet train. And here I am. They’re pickin’ up the transportation tab, too.”

“Are you going to do commentary for a match?”

“Nah. They’re gonna interview me about Ginko.”

There was no warning. Those words slice my unprepared heart like a knife.

“Cuz she’s the first female Shogi pro! Sure, Go an’ Shogi aren’t the same thing, but what other player in the world could relate to Naniwa’s Snow White better than me, eh?”

Shumai-sensei looks around at us like she’s expecting us to agree.

Her eyes stop right on me.

“Oh, that’s right! As a girl in the same line as Ginko, I’m sure the network’d love a comment from you, Ai! So tell me, what do you think, hm? Gimme one o’ them raw, unfiltered quotes that only grade schoolers can!”

“Um W-Well

I have to say something, but The words are getting stuck in my throat.

I have to be friendly, but I’m freezing up.

How I feel about Sora-sensei, as a girl in the same Shogi family I have to

smile and be happy for her, but I

“Excuse me, *Sensei*.” Ayano gives me an unexpected but very much appreciated helping hand. “I have a question to ask Ai about the first female professional as well.”

“Do you now? What’s on your mind, hard-up girl in specks?”

“H-Har-?! Sora-*sensei* spent many seasons at 2-*dan* in the Sub League, but passed through the 3-*dan* division during her first season. I, personally, feel that she has gotten much stronger since the start of this year. Is software behind her sudden drastic improvement? Has Kuzuryu-*sensei* had you practice using software for your own training as well, Ai?”

What a relief. I can talk about practicing techniques.

“Umm Master says it’s too early for me to use software. Right now he says solving Shogi puzzles, playing matches, and lining up match records from strong players is best.”

Master’s teaching style has always been the same.

Since I didn’t start playing Shogi until I was older, I need a better feel for the game. Playing against real people across the board is what’s best for me. Using software would just ruin my Shogi sense.

“But I don’t know what he’s been saying to Sora-*sensei*

“Not to use software, obviously. Can’t you tell?” Shumai-*sensei* interrupts.

“But I would like to know what kind of progress software has made in Go research. You said that the techniques for making boards have evolved over the years, so why do you reject software advances, Shumai-*sensei*?”

“Cuz it’s flimsier than a flaccid c*ck, that’s why.”

Shumai-*sensei* dismisses Ayano’s question without a second thought.

“To me, Go is alive. Playing the way a computer tells you is like going to a machine for life advice.”

“In that case, what do you think caused Sora-*sensei*’s sudden rise to 4-*dan*?”

“There’s only one thing that makes girls change that much. A guy” she says, plain and simple.

..... She didn't say who, exactly, but

"That little push I gave her on New Year's seemed to do the trick! She was twiddling her thumbs, so I had to pitch in. Yeah, I got banned from the Shogi Association 'cuz of it, but I've got no regrets."

I didn't see what happened with my own eyes.

It was during the First Move Ceremony at the beginning of this year. Shumai-sensei burst in completely drunk, just like she is now, but Master heard her coming. He had Keika take Ten-chan and I out of the room before things got out of hand.

..... But, loud as she is, I heard everything.

Ever since that day, Sora-sensei started acting differently around Master

That, and Master changed a little too.

It's not that they're closer now More like they stopped being distant.

It's almost like Almost like!

"Physically, men are stronger than women. Worse, Ginko's a particularly weak girl. Her heart needs to be stolen to have any chance at winnin'. Without that strong flame burnin' inside, she's toast. That's why software wouldn't do a thing for her. You can't fall for a machine."

..... That horrible twinge I've been trying so hard not to think about gets too big to ignore.

It's making my heart twist and churn in my chest.

"Ginko'd never have popped her cherry without me givin' her that tip! Yep, I told her to make the move, and now look at her! Regular o' effort isn't going to cut! You need to do more, give extreme effort! And the most important thing for that is to take a throbbin' c——."

I don't want to listen to this anymore. I just want to plug my ears and scream

It's then.

That moment I hear a small voice next to me.

“..... Now.”

“Mio? Did you say something?”

Mio ignores Ayano and keeps her eyes on me. But, something doesn't seem right What could it be? What's going on?

“Ah!”

That's when I realize exactly what it is.

After all the thought that Mio put into choosing her last lunch in Japan—she hasn't eaten a single bite.

“Ai. I have one last favor to ask you.”

“Favor? From me? Right now?”

“I want you to play me without holding back. Now, before my plane leaves.”

“Huh?”

It's so sudden that I have to make sure I understand.

“Play you *without holding back*? You mean Shogi? At the airport?”

“Yep. One last match, that's all I want. Or do I have to pay to play you now that you're in the Women's League?”

Mio

Why did you have to put it like that?

“..... I'll play against you. Of course, I'd be glad to. And no, I don't need money.”

Actually, I'm grateful for any excuse not to talk about Sora-sensei. And I do want some way to vent all these feelings.

I glance at Shumai-sensei and ask, “But, right here?”

“I was thinking here. I chose this Chinese place because their tables are big enough.”

So, she was waiting all this time for the perfect moment?

Maybe she'd been planning to play Shogi last before leaving?

Actually, that's what I was hoping for.

But I gave up on that once she checked her suitcase with all her boards and pieces in it

Mio isn't the kind of person to ambush people like this, either—.

"Oooh Interestin'."

Shumai-sensei breaks the ice.

"Hey, well-hung hunk! Fetch me some ice water!" she says to the handsome waiter, and he brings her a cup filled to the top with cold ice water.

Then, she raises the cup and—.

"Huh?!"

Rather than drink it, she flips it over on her head!

She soaked her own head in ice water?! Wh-Why?!

"Pwahhh! Now I am quite sober," she says, running her fingers through her soaked hair.

Then a piece of ice that was in Shumai-sensei's head starts sliding down her face.

She catches it with her tongue, crunches it between her teeth a few times, and says, "I, Shumai Honinbou, shall oversee your bout. Have you any reason to refuse?"



"Here, you may focus on your bout without distractions, no?"

Shumai-sensei, now talking as elegantly as I remember back when she wasn't drunk, leads us into a big room at the airport.

It's one of the rental meeting rooms on the fourth floor.

"Airports have meeting rooms?!"

"While this is not equipped with *tatami* mats, this room is quite applicable. There have been times I have come here to study Go up until my flight is ready

to depart But I often fall victim to the allure of alcohol before setting foot inside.”

Overall, this room feels a lot like the association’s multipurpose room where we had our quiz battle. This one is just a lot cleaner and fancier.

“Long desks and folding chairs are stored here, and they should be the right height for girls your age. Have both of you had any experience playing a match in chairs?”

“Yes, during the Mynavi Open.”

“Me, too, at the King of Naniwa Tournament.”

“Very well. Playing matches on a table with chairs is standard procedure for Go. Shogi still stubbornly clings to *tatami* despite Mr. Tsukimitsu’s repeated insistence that such thinking is what prevents Shogi from spreading abroad,” says Shumai-sensei as she checks the strength of the table we’re about to use.

“Mio, do you have a board on your person?”

“A plastic one, yes”

“Then please use this one.”

Sensei opens the bag she had with her. It looks like one of those moneybags you see robbers stealing from a bank in movies. But she pulls out a truly beautiful board instead.

“Fwheee! It’s a miwwow! Twinkle twinkle☆”

“I-I’ve never seen one like this!! It’s so gorgeous, I can see my own face looking back at me!”

Charlette and Ayano’s eyes light up.

“If I may ask, *Sensei*? Why do you have a Shogi board with you?”

“TV stations cannot be trusted to have a decent board on hand. I, Shumai Honinbou, will not allow the life and death struggles that took place in the Sub League to be reenacted on a board unfit for the honor.”

Then she opens a small box to show us painstakingly crafted pieces in a neat row.

“Use these pieces as well.”

“The calligraphy I’ve never seen this style! They are beautiful, but I feel like there’s more to it Were they modeled from a famous player’s handwriting?”

“Ha-ha, you are indeed sharp, Ayano,” answers Shumai-sensei, and then she pauses for a second to let us think before revealing whose. “They—were written by Ginko Sora.”

“.....!!”

“Inexperienced as I am, they are of my design. In essence, you are looking at Ginko Sora’s penmanship on pieces cut by Shumai Honinbou. What set could be more fitting for a bout between young women with the ambition to forge their own path?”

She pours them into a pile on the board, and the pieces sparkle like diamonds. They’re so pretty Almost angelic.

“This is one of three total sets. One for Ginko, another I will keep for myself, and the third I’ll say it is intended as a gift and leave it at that.”

“.....!”

It’s for Master. Now my heart really hurts.

I stare right at those pieces scattered across the board.

There’s a *gin* carved into nutmeg wood. The piece spelling out Silver sparkles just like Sora-sensei’s hair.

Master will take great care, really great care of these pieces. They’ll become his greatest treasure.

And whenever I picture him using these pieces my heart stings.

“Sure. I don’t see why not. Let’s use these.”

Mio sounds like she couldn’t care less about the pieces and starts listing off match details really fast.

“I don’t have too much time before my plane leaves, so let’s do 15 minutes on a stopwatch. One-minute Shogi once it runs out?”

“..... Okay!”

I look through the messy pile of pieces to find a King and put it in my territory.
These pieces, it's like they hug my fingertips.

The grain is so straight and white, it's almost transparent. Nobody's eyes will ever get tired looking at these. They're functional, high quality, extremely good pieces.

Except I keep my eyes off of them as much as I can and line up the pieces as quickly as possible.

Snap! Snap! Snap!!

Mio is putting her pieces in place much, much harder than she ever did during our group practice sessions. We're ready to play in no time.

“Ai No, Hinatsuru-*sensei* has the upper seat.”

Ayano does the piece flip for us. Since I'm higher ranking, the face-up Pawns will be for me. She tosses them into the air—and they clatter across the board.

“All five are face down.”

Mio goes first.

I'm at a disadvantage now, but I'm fine with that.

Because the first one to get hit can punch back twice as hard.

“Ready anytime!”

“..... Ready when you are!”

We exchange bows. Then I close my eyes to concentrate and avoid looking at those pieces for a few seconds.

When———Mio starts mumbling something to herself like a chant.

“..... Diary to the newspaper”

“Huh?”

“..... Departure nosebleed, flea in the pear for everyone”

Is this an off-the-board tactic? Does she even know she's saying it out loud? What in the world does it mean?

“Alright! Let’s do this!!”

Once she slaps both cheeks, Mio plays her first move. She sticks out the Pawn in front of her Rook, 2 Four Pawn.

I do the same thing, advancing the Pawn in front of my own Rook.

We advance on each other in a straight line, like two boxers punching with their right arms at the same time.

“A Double Wing Attack!” says Ayano.

Shumai-*sensei* asks her, “Double Wing? What type of strategy is that?”

“Ai-tan, Ai-tan’s weawwy good at it!”

Even while Charlette is explaining, Mio and I race through our opening sequences.

The Double Wing Attack has a reputation for being a chaotic test of strength, but the opening is almost always the same.

Both players advance the Pawn in front of their Rook toward each other.

They raise the left Gold into position to defend.

After that, they move the right Silver across the board to attack. That’s the basics when it comes to the Double Wing Attack.

But Mio breaks from the standard surprisingly quickly with a bizarre move.

“!! 5 Two King and 3 Six Pawn? She kept the forward Pawn where it was and opened a space for the Knight?”

I think out loud, going over her sequence in more time.

It looks like Mio is playing moves that can be put off to save the offensive advantage she has for later. Like she’s stopping a punch in midair Does she want me to make the first push?

“..... In that case!”

I take her invitation and advance my forward Pawn into her territory to claim one of her Pawns. Now the weak spot in front of her Bishop is wide open.

She leaves it that way and very calmly moves her edge Pawn forward. HUUUUH?!

“She’s not blocking the Rook?!”

Ayano nearly squeals before covering her mouth with both hands.

I almost drop the Pawn I still have in my hand in surprise.

Because it’s as if her right fist is floating in midair, but her left cheek is completely unprotected!

Each part of Mio’s sequence exists as part of different strategies.

The 3 Seven Silver strategy, Twisting Rook The old men at the classroom use those strategies all the time. They’re old Double Wing standards. It looks like Mio has mixed them together to make something that doesn’t work the way any of them should But!

“..... Deep”

The deeper I read into the board, the more I can see that Mio’s opening is flawless. It looked all over the place at first, but she’s read very, very far into it. Her formation is holding together by a thread.

Wait, is this a trap?!

“.....!”

Keeping a close eye on exactly where Mio moves each of her pieces, I draw my Rook all the way into the back row to build up steam. The back of my neck is tingling. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.

Almost like Yes. I feel like I’m going against one of Ten-chan’s formations right now.

But, no! Maybe something even stronger than Ten-chan’s——.

“Then Here!!”

Using time when you don’t know what your opponent is up to is just as bad as a bad move. I go with something just as unusual.

Out of all Double Wing Attack matches, I don’t think anyone else’s 44th move looked like ours.

“Offense and defense The formations match!”

“Oooh? Indeed, they are reflections of one another.”

Yes. By copying an opponent's moves, I can spring whatever trap they have right back at them.

It's just I'll always be one move behind Mio like this, meaning I'll lose eventually. So-called mirroring is a passive strategy.

Mio tries to get me off balance by doing a Bishop Exchange. Her Promoted Bishop slides in and takes mine. And, of course, I take it with my Silver——.

“What?! The Silver went that way?!”

I shifted my left Silver out to the edge in order to take her Bishop.

But, Mio shifts her left Silver to the middle of the board.

Oh no! Not only did she predict that I'd start mirroring her, she knew the perfect timing to break out of it!

“M-Mio is being extremely aggressive! Almost like almost like——.”

“Dat's da way Ai-tan pways!”

Yes, I would force an attack just like this! Figuring out the target is easy but reading all the way to it is overwhelming.

But Mio's next move goes way beyond anything I ever expected.

“Ai.”

Rather than reaching for her side of the board, she picks up the overstuffed backpack at her feet and lifts it up onto her lap.

Then she takes a familiar envelope out of the side pocket and hands it to me.

“Read it.”

“Huh? You want me to read it now?”

“Yep. Read it right now. You promised me I could be there when you did, remember?”

While still holding the letter out to me, she says.

“Don't stop the clock, okay, Ayano?”

“.....”

I get the feeling she won't let me say *no*, so I take the letter from her. If I can

reduce her waiting time while reading it to myself, then why should I refuse?

Tearing the Shogi piece-shaped sticker holding it closed, I have a look.

The letter inside is——.

“.....!!”

So shocking that the paper slips out of my hand.

Ayano picks it up and looks, but she is just as stunned.

“Huuuh?! Th-This is———!!”

“Fwhee? How? How is dis Shogi aweady on da pwaper?” asks Charlette as she peeks over Ayano’s arm.

She’s right. Mio’s letter is our match record.

And——.

“Th-This sequence written on here it lines up perfectly with this match so far!! H-How is that possible?!”

Mio, the only one of us who isn’t freaking out, looks me right in the eyes and brags.

“Surprised? I spent a lot of time thinking about how you would play against me if I had the first move and wrote out my prediction before coming here today.”

I can’t believe anything my eyes are seeing right now. I don’t want to believe them.

The match record letter, Sora-sensei’s pieces Even Mio trying to beat me

“Just as I thought, you went along with a Double Wing Attack, Ai. I mean, you have no reason not to. You’re so good at it, you think your Double Wing can beat anyone anywhere, right?”

Being read like this is making my tummy hurt. I think I might be sick.

“B-But! The Double Wing Attack is a strength contest, so the standards aren’t long enough to go this far in——.”

“The Double Wing isn’t about strength anymore. Computers have played

more matches than people ever could, and they make paths where there weren't any before."

Software.

I know that standards developed by software programs have made an impact on professional players. Master has used some in his matches and gotten results.

But Master can only do that because he is one of the very tip-top professionals

That's why he had me stay away from studying with software and taught me to think everything through in my head—.

"I know your match records like the back of my hand, Ai. Put my knowledge together in a tag team with software that knows so much more than people ever will, and reading this far ahead is doable. You can deny it all you want, but that letter proves I did it."

".....!"

"Now, let's play out the rest."

Mio starts reaching for the board, but then she pulls her hand back, grins, and taps her temple a few times.

"..... Though, I already know exactly how I'm going to checkmate you."

"N-No you don't! That's impossible! Maybe for a Bishop Exchange or a *yagura*, but reading a Double Wing Attack from start to finish isn't—."

"Want to find out?"

Saying so, Mio advances her fifth file Pawn. That's it! The signal to start again!

"..... !!"

I move my King out of the way.

Mio keeps her eyes fixed on the board the whole time as she takes a pencil case out of her backpack and hands it to Ayano.

"Ayano. Would you write out the rest?"

"Ah I-I would be glad to!!"

“Cha, Cha kweeps time!”

Ayano spreads out the match record in front of her and Charlette takes over on the stopwatch.

Since there is an observer too, this feels just like a league match.

“.....”

I know it was a coincidence we ran into Shumai-sensei, but What if everything is going exactly how Mio planned it? Has she really studied the Double Wing Attack so much she can read all the way to the end?

It’s time to find out. Switching into offensive gear, I advance into her territory.

“..... Here!!”

The Knight can’t go back once it moves forward. The second Mio sees it——.

“Just to let you know.”

Mio’s sneer echoes around the meeting room.

“I’m not a pushover, Ai Hinatsuru.”

Then, she doesn’t use any time at all to advance her Pawn, sacrificing it to stop me in my tracks.



“Ayano. How would you describe this match thus far?”

Carefully recording the moves following Mio’s pre-started match record, I tell Shumai-sensei what I’ve seen.

“Ai knows that Mio has been studying her match records, so it seems she’s attempting to deviate from them in order to confuse her. However, Mio must have anticipated it. There’s no hesitation in her hands Mio is gaining points one after another by countering Ai’s moves.”

I’m being extra careful to speak in large, vague terms and avoid being too specific, especially when it comes to pieces and locations.

The players can hear me, so I don’t have any other choice Not that

anything I say would have any effect on these two, though.

“Ai moved her Rook to the center of the board to appear as though she would break through the center of Mio’s formation, but that was just a feint. Ai’s actual target was the right edge.”

“It appears she was successful, yes?”

“She was. As you can see, Ai promoted her Rook deep in Mio’s territory, turning it into a Dragon. However, she lost a Silver in the process and Mio used it to bolster her defensiveness. Mio is showing a refusal to lose.”

“Pardon me if I’m wrong, but wouldn’t it have been wiser for Mio to use that piece offensively since she possessed the advantage of the first move?”

“I think she considered using that Silver to attack. The way that Mio normally plays, the probability she would deploy it to attack is quite high.”

To put it nicely, Mio makes bold moves.

To be blunter, she’s short tempered. That’s the flavor Mio’s Shogi carries.

“Mio was bold in the early-game, but she’s playing extra carefully in the mid-game today. She’s covering her own weaknesses by purposefully harnessing her strengths. Her fighting spirit is just as well-protected as her King is on the board. The constant *I won’t lose no matter how long this match gets drawn out* air she’s projecting has Ai in a rush I think that difference in mental fortitude will have far more impact on the match than their current formations.”

“..... Interesting. How very strong!”

“Yes. Both Ai and Mio are incredibly strong players. I, on the other hand——.”

“Why, no. I was referring to you, Ayano.”

“..... Huh?”

“Grasping not only the situation on the board but each player’s state of mind at a glance, and then succinctly explaining the important points. Furthermore, you avoided pointless comparisons and delivered a living, breathing analysis That was a superb description of both player’s motivations and intentions. Doing so is far more difficult than simply analyzing and comparing two sequences.”

“..... I-I have been watching for a very long time ... the two of them and their Shogi”

That’s why I’m so sure of myself.

Sure that I know exactly what is going through Ai and Mio’s minds.

They both have been extremely conscious of each another since this morning. Mio challenging Ai to a match didn’t surprise me in the slightest.

I wasn’t surprised but

“But I have only watched. I’ve always been watching And, before I knew it, those two were so far ahead of me that I had no opportunity to close the gap.”

Ai defeated me in our very first match in the Practice League.

Mio defeated Maria Kannabe, the very same girl who won against me in the semifinals, to become the King of Naniwa Champion.

No matter how hard I tried.

And I’ve tried and tried and tried again.

But the gap that separates us never gets any smaller.

And now, Mio is about to move out of the country but all I can do is watch——.

“..... There is something I wanted to ask if I ever had the honor of meeting you face-to-face, Shumai-sensei.”

“By all means.”

“What is the true meaning of extreme effort? Is it to work your fingers to the bone? Should I do what is hardest for me? Or is it——?”

“That is an excellent question.”

She answers with no hesitation and a soft chuckle.

“And I always answer, *Finding out for yourself is part of the effort.*”

Ah

That is such a sound point that there is nothing else to say.

So, what it all comes down to is that I wasn’t committing enough effort?

“Make no mistake, I’m not criticizing you for posing the question. In fact, your willingness to ask should be commended. How earnestly you live your life and how much effort you put forth are clear as day to me, Ayano.”

Then what’s the difference between regular and extreme effort?

What is it that I lack?

“Simply doing what’s difficult is not enough. Facing what pains you is the very definition of regular effort. In fact, *keeping up with those precious to you is also as painful.*”

“.....!!”

“Open your eyes. Take the time to process what you see.”

Shumai-sensei closely watches the pieces she created with her own hands being used in a match while imparting these words.

“The real answer is always there but can *only* be found with your eyes.”



I get into position to win so quickly it’s scary.

“..... Immortal powerless sheets, spirit in the narrow Future spirit chick, difficult summer Strong cologne, unmarried bamboo”

Chanting my way to victory, my hands never stop moving.

That’s Ai across from me. The super strong Ai, the Ai I never could beat, and now I’m just a few moves away from checkmating her.

Sure, I had to use a few tricks, but I worked really, really hard.

Software is amazing. It keeps coming up with strong sequences that nobody’s ever seen before. Three cheers for computers!

The problem is that it gives *too much info*.

Which means it comes down to a memorization contest.

I mean, you know how they say the standard sequence for Bishop Exchange Reclining Silver is *yo ni Ina-san? Ina-san* is of the world Cool, right?

Well, it's actually the opening sequence for the offense, all Pawns starting with the fourth file, second file, first file, seventh file, and finally the third. The phrase is just a way to remember it.

At first, I thought *there's no way you can win five Pawns behind!* but in the pros it actually puts the offensive player ahead! That's the first time a sequence ever made me go *wow*.

So I thought I'd make up my own sentences to help me remember.

Like the early-game of a Double Wing.

Software showed me this sequence between advancing the King and jumping the Knight forward. The order in numbers looks like this:

♠ 5 Eight King, ♢ 5 Two King, ♠ 3 Six Pawn, ♢ 8 Six Pawn, ♠ 8 Six Pawn, ♢ 8 Six Rook, ♠ 9 Six Pawn, ♢ 3 Four Pawn, ♠ 2 Four Pawn, ♢ 2 Four Pawn, ♠ 2 Four Rook ♢ 8 Four Rook ♠ 8 Seven Pawn ♢ 2 Three Pawn, ♠ 2 Five Rook, ♢ 7 Four Pawn, ♠ 3 Seven Knight.

Turn it into words, and it goes something like this.

Hive achin', to achin' to the thrix pond. Octagon v octagon, and ate six books. Nixed the pond, the 34th street pond with two forks gone. Two forks gone, took a look. Hate those four books, and ate seven prawns to sleep onto the five book. Set the forth upon, free the seventh night.

That's the trick.

Use an app, and it only takes a second to come up with a story that's easy to remember.

So, long sequences aren't that hard to memorize. Three cheers for computers!

Back when I was getting ready for the King of Naniwa Tournament, Kuzuryu-sensei told me I should *cram as much into my memory as I could*.

Then, what Ai taught me during our quiz battle came in handy. She said that the pattern for the yukata robes was different for each room. It's so much more efficient remembering numbers with words than trying to stuff them all into your head as they are, right?!

Since this changes the name of the game for the Double Wing, I looked into

pretty much every sequence all the way to checkmate. I've even got the point ratings memorized.

Deploying a Gold on the board now gives me a pincer attack. It also gives my formation 1163 points.

Ai's only choice is to block by playing a Rook. Now I've got 1548 points on my side.

"....."

Ai might be a Shogi puzzle goddess, but there's nothing she can do if her hands are tied. Speaking of those hands, they're slogging around like lifeless zombies.

I whisper to myself, just loud enough so I can hear it, and nod again and again.

"Ai only has one Pawn for defense I've got a total of five Golds and Silvers on my side. The point difference is too big to flip I can do this!!"

Then, the second I'm sure I've won.

A move that neither the software nor I ever considered comes up. Defending with a Bishop behind the King, 5 One Bishop!

"Huuuh? Why would you put it Aghhh—?!!"

Deploying the Bishop there doesn't do much of anything.

But deploying another Bishop at 5 Four—she can take both my offensive Gold and my defensive Silver!!

"A-And taking that Silver puts me in check?! How could deploying two Bishops change so much?!!"

Ai sits down on her ankles on the chair and starts slowly swaying back and forth.

"..... Here"

That's not a zombie. Zombies aren't anywhere near this scary.

It's more like a Shogi puzzle deity is possessing one of their shine maidens—.

“Here Here Here Here Here, here, here, here, herehereherehereherehereherehereherehereherehere—.”

“Your engine finally kicked in, huh? BUT!!”

Sure, those Bishops coming out of nowhere surprised me a bit, but Even if we get off the checkmate sequence that the software taught me, this match should still be mine!!

Take on the challenge that is scariest for you.

Those words give me an extra push and *the whole sequence I memorized slips my mind*. I don't need the chant anymore.

From here on, it's not the software that's going to win—*something else will!*

Don't run away from a fork in the road! As they say!!

And I'm not running! Instead, I boost my attack by deploying the Rook I took and push Ai further against the ropes!

“..... Here!!”

Ai takes my defensive Silver and puts me in check.

It feels like instant death is right around the corner. My knees are so close to shaking right now But!

That won't work! I'm winning this Shogi!!

Once I get my King to safety, I throw a curveball by taking her Bishop with my Gold.

There! Now I've got her in a reverse check path! It should be!!

“Here!!”

Still, Ai doesn't look scared at all and shifts into an all-out attack with her other Bishop without missing a beat! But I'm not going to sit back and let her, so I slam my big pieces into hers.

Five moves. Five worldly moves and we exchange all our big pieces!

Big salvos going off, brave sacrifices in the heat of battle! Man, this late-game is like one of those spaceship battles straight out of a movie!

“Ngh! It all comes down to this!!”

“Here, here, here, here, hereherehereherehere——.”

The pressure Ai gives off once she flips that switch, I can’t explain it.

It’s like something else takes over her mind when she smells a checkmate, and it guides her right to it.

The nice Ai that I know isn’t in control anymore. This Ai is someone else entirely.

She’s the Ai that lives inside Ai’s head.

And I hated that Ai. She’s so scary.

But.

“Hating the other guy, running away, that doesn’t fix anything, right? That’s why I’ve tried my absolute best to learn to like the people I hate!”

At school, at the Shogi Association, it doesn’t matter. I always try the best I can.

“That’s how I’ve kept the one I hate the closest to me! That’s you, Ai!”

She’s totally absorbed in the board.

It doesn’t matter what I say because she won’t hear me. Words are useless now. The only way to get through to her is a good wallop on the board!

I should be able to do that! After all——!!

“You’re here———there’s a piece of you inside me, too!!”

Remember that feeling when I beat Maria Kannabe by instant death!
Remember what it felt like to read all out, sit on my ankles and just go crazy like Ai does!

Think back!

Remember that burning fire inside!! Remember how my heart was thumping so hard it coulda blown up?!!

““Here, here, here, here Herehereherehere hereherehere hereherehere!!””

———I see it.

As long as I don’t give her a Bishop, I will win. It’s Bishop zero.

It was part of those *invulnerable* formations Kuzuryu-sensei made me memorize, and it saved this match for me.

“There’s a *you* inside me, Ai. But it looks like there’s someone else inside you.”

Their face pops into my head for just a second, along with the warmth of his handshake the first time we met.

“——Here!!!”

Ai deploys a Knight, putting me in check and setting herself up to take my Promoted Bishop, too. *Gasp!*



But that just means my King has a way out.

Then ... just when Ai takes the Bishop just like I wanted her to.

Instead of giving her my Bishop, I put her in check and start a 23-move sequence that ends in my checkmating her King.

“..... I lost.”

Those words in Ai’s voice—it’s the first time I’ve ever heard them.



“We have a winner, yes?”

Shumai-*sensei* stands up as soon as she sees me surrender.

“Mio.”

“Y- Yes?!!”

“That was a superb bout. Using software as a study tool is starting to become more commonplace within the Go community. I have staunchly resisted this trend until now because I felt as though software was a crutch that would supersede my own efforts,” the only woman to ever win a title says with an inspired look in her eyes. “However, after witnessing you play firsthand, I believe my views may have been in error. It seems that software is a separate facet into which one can channel their efforts.”

“.....”

Mio doesn’t say anything. She just bows her head as deep as she can.

“Ai.”

“..... Yes?”

“My flight will be leaving shortly, so I must excuse myself. Use this room as long as you like. Your remaining time with Mio is limited Be sure to leave with no regrets.” Saying so, Shumai-*sensei* packs up the board and pieces and then leaves the room.

P-TMP.

The door closes and the air gets heavy.

Master taught me that the loser needs to be the first one to speak up at times like this. Making it so the winner doesn't feel awkward is proper manners.

It's just I don't know what to say.

"....."

Pathetic.

How could I let this my last match with Mio, end so easily?

"..... Looks like We don't need a review session, right?" I manage to say with what I'm pretty sure looks like a mean smile on my face as I stare at my lap.

"We don't have the board anymore And you've got your plane to catch. So ——."

"Ai," Mio says softly with her eyes on me. "Does it hurt?"

"Huh?"

"Does it hurt?"

"..... Very much, yes"

Losing hurts, a lot.

But being so disappointed in myself hurts a whole lot more.

"You said you didn't need to do a



review session for this Shogi, didn't you? Can we talk about a different one?"

"A different match?"

"The handicapped one that I lost to you in the Practice League."

".....! That one?"

I remember that Shogi like it happened yesterday.

It was back when I was learning about Ranging Rook from Oishi-sensei with Master. I was playing with my handicap and beat Mio It was the first time she ever cried in front of me. She cried so hard, we couldn't do a review session.

I had just hurt my best friend. Trembling from the shock of it all, Master told me, *"If you're a person who's afraid to win, there's no need to keep suffering like this. I'll release you right here and now. Pack up your things and go back to where you came from!!"*

It was the first time Master had ever yelled at me like that. How could I forget?

"After that day's Regular Activities, I went to talk with Kuruno-sensei. I told him, *I'm quitting Shogi.*"

That happened?

I was so caught up in what I was going through that day that I never thought about what kind of pain Mio was in or what she thought about me after that match

"I meant it, too. I knew you were really good, Ai, but I thought I understood you were different, but ... still, losing when I had the advantage like that, it stung harder than I ever imagined."

"..... Then Why did you keep playing?"

"It was because of what Kuruno-sensei told me. *It's a waste to quit when it hurts.*"

"It's a waste?"

Things that hurt and things going to waste.

I just don't see how those are connected But Mio tells me.

"I'd always thought that I could be the best at whatever I tried the hardest to do. I thought there wasn't a point if I couldn't be number one," she says, looking up at the ceiling as if looking back on all her memories in Japan. "So I tried a whole bunch of things just to see. I liked Shogi and I never lost to a girl my age, so I signed up for the Practice League. Joining the Women's League also sounded like fun At least it did until you came, Ai."

"....."

"I could tell you were different the moment I sat down across from you the first day. I mean, the first girl my age I lose to in an even match only started learning Shogi half a year before then *and* she's the Ryuo's live-in apprentice I'd never been so jealous in my life."

Jealous.

Mio, my best friend in both Shogi and school with that blindingly bright smile, was jealous of me? I'm shocked.

"Then, only two months after that ... just two months! Getting destroyed so easily even with the handicap was the final blow, and I was going to quit. The gap between us was just going to keep getting bigger. With you around, Ai, there was no point in playing Shogi Ten-chan, another prodigy, showing up just made things worse."

There's no point in not being number one.

I can relate so much to that. Master told me, too. He said second place is just the last one to lose.

And I want to be number one.

Because, after all, I refuse to be anything but number one.

So, when I realize I can't be I might end up throwing everything away like Mio almost did I think to myself, but Mio says the strangest thing.

"But, you know? That just made me want to try even harder! I decided to give it one more shot with everything I had *because* I couldn't be number one, because losing stung so bad!"

“But you still can’t be number one

“Think about it. What’s the point of trying if you know for a fact you’re already the best?”

“.....!!”

“Yeah, losing hurts. But losing made me realize something. I’d be wasting so much if I quit Shogi now! Don’cha think?” she says, smiling her bright smile at the same time. “Not knowing makes me want to find out. Not knowing makes me like it. I try so hard because I can’t be number one. So I stick close to the strongest one.”

Ah! Someone gasps.

“That’s extreme effort,” whispers Ayano and Mio nods at her.

“Not seeing results after a long time really eats away at motivation, but ... compared to everyone fighting their hearts out in the Sub League, I haven’t even tried hard enough to get my foot in the door, have I? The way I see it, it’s too early for me to make decisions like that.”

No effort goes unrewarded.

That’s what Keika said when she was interviewed the day she got into the Women’s League.

She cried during the interview, but for some reason, I can see her face in Mio’s smile.

“When I went to the office to quit the Practice League because I’m moving to another country, Kuruno-*sensei* gave the okay right off the bat. He said he was sad to see me go, but Can you guess what else he said?”

“What did he say?”

“Hm. You’re not quitting this time, you’re graduating. Isn’t that cool!”

Mio does her best impression of Kuruno-*sensei*, the player in charge of overseeing the Practice League.

It’s good, too! I can’t help but giggle a little.

Bu I see. Graduation. Mio didn’t get the qualification, but she’s officially a Shogi player now.

That has to be why the look on her face reminds me of Keika.

“Besides, there might not have been anything in the world that I could be number one in to start with, you know? Still——.”

“Still?”

“I found something where I can burn the brightest. That alone is pretty lucky, yeah?!”

“Burn the brightest”

“Could you feel it, Ai? My heat.”

Yes, I could.

A full blast of it straight from your heart that I couldn’t hold back.

I keep my eyes away from that blinding intensity and tell her, “..... Thank you, Mio. Thank you for choosing to play your last match with me”

“I was just paying you back for what you did for me.”

“Being the bad guy right?” I ask her, thinking back to our training sessions before the King of Naniwa Tournament.

That day I was playing handicap matches against Mio, Ayano and Charlette, but I told them it was more like I was doing *instructional matches* rather than training with them

I had to be mean. I didn’t know any other way to light a fire in Mio’s heart.

“Ahaha. I guess it wasn’t much of a distraction if you figured that out.”

My mental fortitude is weak. If someone knows how to press my buttons, I fall apart in a snap.

Well, not quite. I’ve always been——.

“Your Shogi only goes into a slump when you’ve got something else on your mind, Ai. That’s why I waited for the right time to challenge you and gave you my letter during the match. It was all to knock you off your game.”

“Mio”

“I noticed all the way back at the summer festival in the shopping arcade: you haven’t been yourself.”

“..... You’re right”

That day during the festival.

Everyone moved inside my school to get out of the rain. That’s when Sora-sensei told me this, *Sorry to break it to you, but I’m not backing down. I’m number one.*

Then Sora-sensei became a professional player. She was even number one in the 3-dan division.

Looking at all of her amazing accomplishments, I couldn’t help but think: I might not be able to win.

I might never be number one

“If you’re *hurting* even a little bit right now, Ai, then my payback worked! It was the one thing I wanted to do before leaving Japan!”

“Yep, your payback hurt, but you’ve also opened my eyes. What I really need to have is friends, right?”

“Nope.”

“Huh?”

“I was never trying to be your friend, Ai.”

“Mi- o?”

“What I really wanted was—to be your rival!”

“.....!!”

“Ai, you’ve always been chasing people up until now, right? But now you know what being overtaken feels like. It hurts so much more than just losing Doesn’t it?”

“..... Yes.”

I grab fistfuls of my skirt with both hands and squeeze very, very hard.

“It hurts, Mio. Not just in my heart, but lower In the pit of my stomach, this heat hurts.”

Burning heat.

It's not like my whole body is going to go up in flames. Just one piece, deep, deep down, that's hurting Burning.

I've never felt heat like this before, ever.

If there's a way to describe this emotion I don't know the word yet.

"That's what I really wanted to give you, Ai. I want you to carry it to remember me by."

This time, Mio puts her hand on her heart.

"I don't care if you forget all of our fun memories together, that day at the beach, Sora-sensei's birthday party, our quiz battle, all of them! I want you to burn this Shogi match into your memory forever!! Because——."

She puts her other hand on top of it and squeezes her chest as if trying to hold on to a precious memory and yells as loud as she can.

"Because I DON'T WANT YOU TO FORGET ME!!!"

A single tear sparkles like a jewel on its way down Mio's cheek.

"If you're in a pinch and think all is lost, I want you to think back to when you lost today and feel this pain. The rest of the match is my present for you, Ai."

"..... I won't forget, I won't, I won't, I told her while trying to keep the tears back. "How could I ever forget you, Mio?!"

No fair, Mio Winning and running away like this Leaving me behind, no fair

Mio then holds out her hand to Ayano.

"Ayano, may I have the letter back? Did you finish it?"

"....."

"Ayano?"

"Which letter?"

"Huh? What do you mean which——?"

"You prepared countless letters, Mio."

Huh?!

What does she mean?

“The letter that you gave to Ai on the train came from the front pocket of your backpack, and you put it back in the same place. However, the letter you gave Ai this time came from a *side pocket*.”

“Oh, c’mon, Ayano! Giving that away just ruined everything I said!”

Mio smacks Ayano on her shoulder a few times before accepting that the cat was out of the bag and opens all her backpack’s pockets.

Then she flips it over and dumps all the letters out onto the table like a big waterfall. They pile up like a big mountain right before my eyes.

Charlette looks up at all of them with really big eyes.

“Fwhee! So many wedders!!”

“Y- You did all this research?”

Analyzing my match records with software?

All to beat me today?

“How was I supposed to know how the match would go?! The Double Wing is your go-to strat, but playing offense and defense is so different. Then there’s all the deviations And you play tons of different ways, did you know that?! Even Ranging Rook for crying out loud! I had to work really, really hard Man, am I glad one was right”

Mio starts sorting through the mountain of letters on the table.

It looks like the Shogi sticker she used to seal each one is a little different.

“This one here was for a *yagura*. That’s a Bishop Exchange. Here’s another one, another Bishop Exchange, and another I think there’s about 20 Double Wings where I go first in here. I prepped the same number for Side Pawn Capture, offense and defense too. I’m just glad I didn’t have to worry about Double Ranging Rook strats!”

“..... There’s more here for Side Pawn Capture on defense than Double Wing Attacks. Why?”

“Because your defensive Double Wing is terrifying! I was hoping I could spring a few traps with Side Pawn Capture, but nope.”

“What if I didn’t take the bait?”

“Probably would’ve goaded you into taking it. *Losing to an opponent who didn’t take the side pawn? Better apologize to your ancestors!* or something like that!”

“He-he That’s silly.”

I can’t help but giggle.

“But, the Double Wing is your main strat after all. I tell you, if all my research didn’t match up today, I’d have bawled my eyes out! Seriously, Ayano, thanks for giving me the first move!”

“..... I think I still would’ve lost if I went first.”

Mio was so focused today, it was unbelievable.

The late game is where I’m at my best, but she still beat me to the finish line.

It doesn’t matter that she initiated the late game with a lead. Even with all that research she did in secret, I still had plenty of chances.

I couldn’t take advantage of those chances because I’m weak.

Chances always pass right through my fingers.

It’s because my heart isn’t strong enough.

Solving Shogi puzzles or having a good memory have nothing to do with it.

I’m starting to understand what it is that I don’t have as a competitor.

And I think I know what I need to do to get it——.

“Of course, you would have lost, Ai.”

“Ayano?”

“You don’t understand the first thing about Mio. You don’t even try to understand her.”

It almost sounds like Ayano is scoffing at me.

“Even the reason why Mio delayed her departure all the way to today

Whether Sora-sensei became a professional or not, it would be jarring for you She was worried you were going to quit Shogi altogether and stayed behind so that you wouldn't"

Huh"?

Mio stayed in Japan until second semester began for me"?

"I understand Mio through and through. After all, I've known her much, much longer than you have, Ai!"

Her tone gets sharper with every word.

Thud! Ayano stomps and yells. Her attack is just getting started.

"How on earth do you not understand?! Why is it that she, why is it that Mio chose you?! Why did she want you to be her last match?! I wanted Mio to research my Shogi, not yours! If I I were stronger"!!"

Ayano is crying.

She completely ignores the fact that Charlette is tugging on her skirt with worry, bites her lip and clenches her fists. She's trembling very hard.

I've never seen Ayano hurting like this before"

"Sorry, Ayano."

Mio gently wraps her hands around Ayano's trembling fists and lowers her head in a little bow.

"I'm sorry. But, I——."

"..... You don't have to apologize. I already understand", says Ayano, her voice shaking as she lets up a little bit on her lip. But she's still looking at her feet.

"Ai I'm sorry"

"No, no! I'm sorry, too! Really sorry!!"

Ranting doesn't make anger go away.

I know that because I've gone through what Ayano is feeling right now before. It was when Ten-chan played against Sora-sensei in the Queen Title Match.

Watching that final match from the boardside table, I kept thinking to myself that this should have been my Shogi, my story.

That feeling I'll never forget it as long as I live.

But after everything that's happened recently, it's faded quite a bit

The meeting room goes quiet again.

I softly whisper, "..... I have a lot on my mind."

"Mn-hm."

Mio nods, but doesn't pry any further.

I guess she knows what I'm talking about.

So, instead of words She gives me a passport to start my own journey.

"Here you go! My present for you, Ai!"

There're so many letters, I can't possibly hold them all at once.

It's a ton, overwhelmingly so.

"So many"

"And I lined them all up. They're all your matches, Ai. I racked my brain and wrote out our first match at the association's classroom. But there's more than just me and you. I asked around the Player's Room to see if anyone could tell me anything and went to Kuruno-*sensei* to see if he remembered any of your matches in the Practice League. I even checked your Shogi account online I bet you anything I know you better than you know yourself right now, Ai," Mio says confidently. "Computers can teach Shogi techniques. Even someone with my level of talent can play like a totally different person if they learn early-game sequences from software. As long as you've got the motivation, you can pull off what I just did."

"I can play that well?"

Could I, as terrible as I am in the early-game, actually be that precise?

"I'm sure you could do better than that, Ai. You don't have to remember the sequences with words like I had to. All you need is determination."

"Determination"

I've always been the *good* girl.

I learned everything exactly how it was taught to me.

Because I'd get stronger that way.

Because I'd be more likable that way. Being Master's best apprentice was my goal.

Up until now, both of those things overlapped, but

"I'm leaving the country, but I'm still gonna play Shogi over there. I don't care if there's no Practice League or if I can't join the Women's League. What about you, Ai? Are you happy the way things are? Or——?"

"..... I"

What do I want to do? What do I want to be? I ask myself.

..... I could keep going the way things are now.

Keep learning what Master wants to teach me and be the ideal live-in apprentice for him.

That way, he'll treat me well and teach me anything I want to know *as an apprentice*.

But that will turn out just like this Shogi did. For sure.

I'll just keep rolling with the punches, without thinking or choosing anything myself, and walk toward an easily predictable future ... until the moment that inescapable reality comes anyway.

Am I really okay with that? Why do I play Shogi?

——.

"..... I will get stronger."

I could think about this for years and not know what the right answer is.

But the hot blood pouring out of the wound that Mio just carved into my heart is screaming.

"I want to be stronger!!"

"Great!"

Mio holds out her right pinky finger and nods.

“And I’ll come back even stronger than I am now! I’ll prove to everyone that getting stronger has nothing to do with where you are! So——.”

——So, let’s play again.

We promise each other.

We pinky swear to sit across a Shogi board from each other again.

And I’ll be much, much stronger that day. I’m the one who has to overtake Mio now.

Mio left that day.

Left Japan. Left the Grade Schooler Practice Group. Left the Practice League.

And on that very same day——I think that’s when I started my own journey.

“Ah! Is that it?!” I yell and point to the airplane that’s just leaving the ground on the other side of the terminal building.

The big and slightly older-looking plane roars up into the sky.

“Yes, that has to be the one! It has the name of that company painted on the side I still have no idea how to pronounce it, so there’s no mistake! OOOVER HEEERE!!”

Ayano waves her arms high over her head and screams. She’s always so quiet, so I never imagined she could yell this loud.

Charlette and I wave our hearts out at the plane.

Hoping that, somehow, Mio might see us.

“Heeey! Miooo!! H———EEEEY!!”

“Mio-taaan! MIIIOOO-T———AAAN!!”

We yell ourselves hoarse so she can hear us over the engines.

“MI———OOO!!”

We got drowned out at first, but little by little, we get loud enough to overpower them.

But just as we do the plane is already out of sight.

“Mio-tan went bye bye,” Charlette says quietly in the same bright voice as always.

Ayano and I are still looking up at the clouds. Because, well The tears built up in our eyes will fall if we don’t.

When Charlette suddenly curls up in a ball.

“Charlette? What’s——?”

“..... Ugh *Sniff* *Hiccup*”

Her tiny back trembles just a little bit.

Then she cries out—way louder than a jet engine.

“WAAAHHHHHHHHHH! DWON’T DWON’T GO, MIO-TAAAAN! MIO-TAAAN! MIO-TAAAAAN!!”

Mio-tan

Mio-tan

She keeps yelling Mio's name from her spot on the ground.

Almost like she thinks Mio will come running back with that bright smile of hers if she yells enough times.

Except all her yells just echo off the building



“She’s already on her way to her new home, Charlette,” Ayano gently whispers as she kneels down next to her and puts a comforting hand on her back.

“You fought hard, Charlette. You held up very well, too.”

Ahh I really am blind

I was so focused on my own problems that I never bothered to look at Charlette, not once.

Now I get it. I understand why Charlette acted like her usual self the whole time.

It was her way of showing Mio how much she had grown.

And Mio noticed.

That’s why she chose to give Charlette her old water bottle.

Because the boxed lunches there have really strong soy sauce——.

“..... Cha, Cha’s going to da Pwatice Weague,” she says, hugging her knees in close.

She then looks up at Ayano with her eyes and nose running like faucets and squeezes her hand.

“Ayanyo.”

“Yes Charlette?”

“Wet’s get stwong, together.”

“..... Yes, let’s!”

Ayano puts her other hand on top of Charlette’s and they both look up at the spot in the sky where Mio’s plane disappeared.

“I’ve had enough of using talent as an excuse to run away. I know what I want to become and I’m in the right place to make it happen. All that’s left is effort,” says Ayano in a dignified voice.

“Regular effort won’t be enough, so I just need to try harder. To commit extreme effort.”

Charlette and Ayano fall asleep on the train ride home from crying so much.

The gentle swaying of the carriage must have been the perfect lullaby. Holding hands, Charlette is using Ayano's shoulder as a pillow while Ayano is leaning on her head.

I feel a little bit left out sitting across from them, so I start opening the huge bundle of letters that Mio gave me instead.

"..... Amazing So's this one, and this one too!"

Most of the match records stop at different places in the early-and mid-games, some go all the way to checkmate But they all have one thing in common: quality.

On to the next, on to the next. I tear open the seal and dive right in.

"Each of these is amazing!! I didn't know grade school students like us could research so thoroughly!"

I know she used software, but these are just as good as professional match records No! Actually they are even better when it comes to creativity because there aren't any biases.

Her bold ideas keep catching me by surprise. But they're so precise.

Of course, I'd get a lot stronger in the early-game by mastering these openings.

But! What's really stoking the fire in my heart is——.

"This Shogi all of them would be so much fun to play!!"

Right?! Aren't they exciting?! I told you I know exactly what you like, Ai!

I can just see Mio puffing out her chest with pride.

"..... Huh?"

It's the last envelope, but it is the biggest surprise yet.

"She scrapped this one? Did she forget to throw it away and put it in her bag by mistake?"

It's a match record, but there's a big X drawn on it.

Reading through it, it's a match where both players counter each other's

strengths. This Shogi goes back and forth so many times, if someone told me it was from professionals or Sub League, I'd believe them

If Mio had opened like this during our match today, I think she would have won even more easily than she did.

".....Why did she cross it out?"

I spot Mio's handwriting on the margin. It explains her reasoning in big, bold letters.

"Ai would never, ever run away."

".....! Mio!"

I hug as many letters as I can and cry right here in my seat.

All of my memories with her come flooding back as warm tears roll down my cheeks. They won't stop.

The match record that Mio crossed out has become my greatest treasure.

"..... No fair No fair at all"

Always smile.

Get along with anyone and everyone. Keep facing forward.

Happiness is meant to be shared, not taken for yourself. That way, you can play Shogi with so many different people. That way, you can get even stronger.

And——stay cheerful and bright no matter what happens!

That's not easy, but I'll be fine.

Because I have the best letter in the world.

"..... Right, Mio?"

I look up and see a plane passing by in front of the clouds outside the window.

Puffy white ones, just as bold as Mio.



AFTERWORD

This book, *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done! 13*, is about the day after the events of Book 12 with some novelized short stories from drama CDs mixed in.

It resembles Book 8 in many ways, but there is one major difference.

That being that the main character Yaichi's point of view doesn't appear once from beginning to end.

However, this doesn't mean that Yaichi is no longer the star. Rest assured, he will return again to carry on with the Ryuo's work in Book 14.

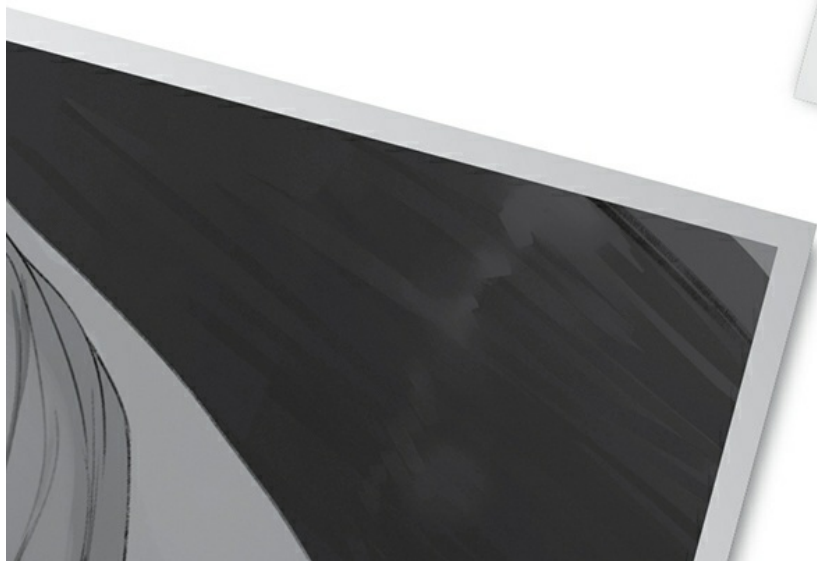
There were several reasons I made the decision to structure the book this way, one of which being that I wanted to give Mio a proper send-off. However I must admit the biggest factor was being unable to travel due to the coronavirus.

I couldn't interview players and the Shogi title matches were delayed. Even regular league matches were pushed back for weeks, so I faced a severe shortage of match records and review sessions from which to draw inspiration. As a result, I was forced to refer back to past matches and rely on prewritten material. Writers who need to see and experience things in person like myself have learned just how precious normal *everyday life* was these past few months

Book 14 kicks off the beginning of the final arc. While hoping with all my heart that this situation comes to an end even one day sooner, I'll be doing my best to find new and innovative ways to gather material and bring you a more intense, engaging story than ever before!



NANIWA'S SNOW WHITE AND
THE DEMON KING'S DAY OFF



NANIWA'S SNOW WHITE AND THE DEMON KING'S DAY OFF

Ginko Sora was fast asleep.

The girl known as Naniwa's Snow White lay serenely between white sheets as if she had become Sleeping Beauty.

"She seems to be sleeping soundly," commented Shogi Association Chairman Seiichi Tsukimitsu as he listened to her rhythmic breathing and a smile of relief swept across his face.

A blind Shogi prodigy, sound was how he comprehended the world around him.

The way his playing style was compared to the speed of light was both an ironic twist from the Shogi gods and a miracle in its own right.

"..... Sorry, chairman."

As he always did when addressing Mr. Tsukimitsu, Ginko's younger brother apprentice Yaichi Kuzuryu spoke in a clear, respectful voice.

"If this is important, I can call you as soon as she wakes up, but"

"No, no. That won't be necessary, Ryuo."

Mr. Tsukimitsu smiled toward Yaichi sitting in a chair at Ginko's bedside and continued, "I would like nothing more than for her to rest without having anything more on her mind. She's been fighting a strenuous battle over these past six months, so she deserves as much."

The Sub League's 3-*dan* division.

Ginko made it through that six-month hell on earth on her first attempt.

At the same time, she accomplished a grand achievement: becoming the first female professional Shogi player in history.

Though she was not a Junior High School Pro like Yaichi had been, she reached the rank of 4-*dan* at the age of 15 just as he did— albeit mere days before her

16th birthday.

The news had gone beyond the confines of the Shogi world. All of Japan was now on the edge of its collective seat, waiting for this delicate girl to awaken.

“She will open her eyes to a life she has never known. Slow moments like these will be rare and few in between for quite a while moving forward. The association is receiving an endless stream of requests as we speak. TV spots, exhibition matches Rest assured, we will decline the vast majority, but now that she has become a professional, rejecting them all is no longer an option.”

“I think she understands that. But”

“What is it, Ryuo?”

Yaichi struggled to find the right words. Summoning up all his courage, he decided to be frank with the chairman.

“She seemed extremely concerned about when her debut will take place.”

“I cannot make any promises about when her professional debut will happen at this time. The matching process has yet to get underway.”

Mr. Tsukimitsu’s response was cautious and deliberate.

Skill had the final say in the Shogi world.

Turn that statement around, and it meant each player was selling their popularity.

With popularity, sponsorships follow. Nearly limitless matches could be scheduled so long as sponsors provided financial backing and prize money.

And the first match played by the first female professional had the potential to generate great revenue, even as an exhibition match.

If said match were to be against the Meijin, with all his accolades and recently bestowed Citizen’s Award, it was not difficult to surmise that the association would have an unfathomable payday instore.

Mr. Tsukimitsu’s position as chairman required him to take the benefits to the Shogi world as a whole into consideration.

Now that his tactic of shielding Ginko with the line *Sub League members are still in training* was no longer applicable, a difficult decision lay before him.

“..... Currently, we would prefer Miss Sora’s debut to be a league match. We have no intention of organizing a special exhibition match to mark the occasion. Isn’t that right, Ms. Oga?”

He confirmed with his secretary, Sasari Oga Women’s 1-*dan* who stood at his side.

In turn, she opened her agenda and answered, “That’s correct, chairman. We have no such plans at this time.”

“..... Thank you,” said Yaichi.

These two saying so meant that they would do their utmost to see it happen Ms. Oga opening her agenda to confirm despite having the upcoming schedule memorized was a small performance meant to reassure Yaichi and Ginko of that very fact.

This consideration was the best medicine for the battered and bruised Ginko.

Mr. Tsukimitsu smiled and brought up a different topic.

“By the way, Ryuo. I believe I asked you for a comment from Miss Sora as a newly promoted 4-*dan*. Was she able to prepare one?”

“Oh, yes. I had her prioritize getting it done while she was awake. Ummm”

Yaichi struggled sifting through his pockets to find the piece of paper Ginko had written for him.

Mr. Tsukimitsu, being blind, simply waited patiently but his secretary had to stifle a chuckle as she watched the events unfold.

“..... Found it. This is it.”

“If I may.”

Ms. Oga stepped in for her superior and read the document aloud for him as she always did.

Aspiration at 16 Ginko Sora 4-*dan*

Looking back, 12 years have passed since I began studying Shogi under

Kousuke Kiyotaki at the age of four. Over that span, seven years have been spent in the Sub League. That's more than half of my Shogi lifetime.

It began with failure. After my first Sub League Entrance Exam, I thought I was doomed to be labeled an outcast despite being only seven years old. The darkness I confronted back then continues to haunt me even now as a professional.

I give credit to luck for passing through the 3-*dan* division in my inaugural season.

Mine has been an emotional journey. However, I cannot afford to look back. There will be time for that once I retire. All I can do now is face forward and keep moving. I must forge my own path to places I have yet to see.

Ran-ningu to horaizon

"..... What do you think?" asked Yaichi with the same face as a student waiting for their teacher's remarks. Though he didn't write it himself, he was even more curious to know their evaluation than if it had been his own words.

"Let me think"

Mr. Tsukimitsu ran his finger across his chin and continued.

"..... Ms. Oga, what are your thoughts?"

"Huh? Y-You would like one's opinion? One thinks Well"

She bought herself a few seconds to process the shock of being asked directly by pushing her glasses up and down her nose as she looked between the paper and her superior. Finally, Ms. Oga put her thoughts into words.

"..... It seems rather formal. Though she is a professional player, she is also a high school student. Something more youthful and vibrant may be more relatable. Also, the last sentence feels rather forced, like a slogan that misses the mark. Personally, I think readers will find her English hilarious *Cough*, more memorable than anything else."

"Interesting. Very fine points as always, Ms. Oga."

The chairman agreed with his secretary's assessment to the point that it was

slightly awkward.

“And your thoughts, Ryuo? Keeping the content as is, how would you feel about making minor adjustments?”

“That should be fine. Gin——.”

Yaichi stopped himself mid-word and nodded.

“..... Big Sis was trying a little too hard. It seemed like she thought she should be as *professional* as possible, now that she’s a pro. All those commas and no contractions

“It’s that way for everyone, myself and the Meijin included.”

For the sake of her reputation, as she was unable to take part in this discussion, Ginko Sora had done background research——.

She had used previous articles written by players upon promotion as a reference. It goes without saying that Mr. Tsukimitsu’s and Yaichi’s were among them.

Therefore, if she had been awake at this juncture, she would have said, “*It’s not my fault it’s so formal!*”

Though, they may have had a good point about the last line.

“We shall be leaving now, Ryuo. Please give my regards to Sora 4-*dan*.”

“Going already?”

“Indeed. I must prepare for my press conference this afternoon. I may need to contact you once the alterations to her article have been completed, however.”

“Of course, anytime And, um, I’m sorry I didn’t get tea for both of you

“Please, pay it no mind. Once the dust has settled, I would love to celebrate the occasion with the whole Kiyotaki Shogi family. In Osaka, to be clear.”

Yaichi and Ginko’s master, Kousuke Kiyotaki, also happened to be Mr. Tsukimitsu’s younger brother apprentice.

Without apprentices or descendants of his own, the Kiyotaki household may be the one place the ever-isolated Mr. Tsukimitsu could feel the warmth of a

family.

From Yaichi and Ginko's perspective, the Eternal Meijin was simultaneously an existence far out of reach and a kind, uncle-like presence who had been in their lives since they began training over a decade ago.

"..... Yes. I'll see you in Osaka," Yaichi promised as they parted ways.

The chairman placed his hand on his secretary's shoulder so she could lead him out the door, and Yaichi happened to catch the question he posed.

"If I may ask, Ms. Oga. You have been chuckling to yourself since the moment we stepped inside their hospital room Was something amiss?"

"My apologies. The juvenility was just so *He-he.*"

"Juvenile? You couldn't be referring to Miss Sora's professionalism, could you? In which case, what type of juvenility are you referring to?"

"*He-he-he.* Well, it just so happens——....."

Though Mr. Tsukimitsu had difficulty comprehending the *juvenility* his secretary was describing, asking the same question to Ginko would have most definitely made her blush.

At any rate, the guests had departed.

Yaichi and Ginko were alone in the hospital room with a fruit basket so large it required both hands to carry. A card that read *Get well soon – Japan Shogi Association* was pinned to the basket.

"Whew It was only a few minutes, but being in the same room with the chairman is seriously nerve-racking"

Yaichi then tried to undo the top button of his jacket.

However, he struggled to slide it through the hole.

Which made sense since he was only using his *left hand*.

"..... Ms. Oga noticed I was holding Ginko's hand the whole time, didn't she?"

Yaichi finally got the button undone and whispered to himself as he pulled his right hand, still interlocked with Ginko's, out from underneath the white

blanket.

She had asked to hold hands before falling asleep.

Then she fell into a deep slumber without letting go.

Of course, Yaichi was sure that she would either wake up or release his hand before the chairman arrived, but Ginko kept sleeping with his hand in hers. It was as if Snow White had truly become Sleeping Beauty.

Yaichi panicked when there was a knock at the door and greeted their guests from his seat at her bedside with their hands hastily hidden under the blanket.

“The blanket was my only chance”

Yaichi tried many times to take his hand away while talking with Mr. Tsukimitsu, but Ginko’s unconscious grip was much stronger than he expected. Not to mention part of him didn’t want to let go either, so Yaichi kept his hand in hers under the covers the entire time.

He thought hiding that fact from the blind chairman would be easy.

However, deceiving his observant secretary was next to impossible.

There was no doubt Ms. Oga was describing the scene to her superior at this very moment. What’s more, it would surely be used as *ammunition* to force Yaichi and Ginko to go along with their plans in the future.

Sasari Oga wasn’t feared as the *Shadow Don* for nothing.

“..... Yeesh. I’m dying over here while you’re sleeping like a rock,” Yaichi grumbled as future perils ran through his mind.

Ginko was fast asleep.

So, of course she didn’t respond.

“Ginko? You’re sleeping, right?”

Yaichi looked back down at the girl sleeping on the bed.

“Hm? Hold on a sec. She looks redder than before, Maybe the room got too warm because there were so many people in here?” Yaichi mumbled as he checked the air conditioning remote and lowered the temperature a few degrees with his left hand.

As Tokyo was still roasting in late summer heat at the beginning of September, it was the correct course of action.

Cooler air began to fill the room and Yaichi returned his line of sight to Ginko.

“She really is pretty Cute, too”

He gently brushed the silver bangs away from her eyes using his left hand and gazed lovingly upon her.

Her skin was a pure, almost glistening white.

Apart from the pink dusting that covered her cheeks, that is.

Seeing his childhood friend now on the brink of womanhood sound asleep was too much for Yaichi, and he let out a long sigh.

“Haaaaaa Sleeping Ginko is just too cute And she and I are actually together now? A real couple? Man, people are going to be so jealous”

Without the fear of being overheard by Ginko, Yaichi’s voice grew louder with every word.

The Shogi fandom had been spouting theories about their relationship for years.

Fans who considered them to simply be sibling apprentices were in the vast minority.

Threads about Ginko in chat rooms across the Internet had once been filled with comments like *they’re dating, no doubt and not yet, but it’s only a matter of time*.

..... Until Yaichi took elementary school-aged apprentices, anyway.

Once rumors started to spread that he was living with one of them, fan comments along the lines of *I guess they weren’t dating after all, Yep, just apprentice siblings, So, he was just a lolicon who likes flat chests and Snow White the invincible couldn’t beat out a little girl in the end, huh drowned out the rest*.

Thus Ginko had a great deal of things to say to him.

“If you’re going to ask me out, hurry up already!” For example.

“Quit giving grade schoolers special treatment!” For instance.

“Stupid!”

“Oblivious!”

“Drop dead!”

The list goes on.

However “I love you, too” was on that list.

“Huh? She’s definitely getting redder Lowering the AC a bit more wouldn’t hurt.”

Yaichi used his left hand to work the remote.

It was now cool enough in the room to raise goosebumps.

Be that as it may, the red blotches on Ginko’s cheeks showed no signs of regressing.

In fact, the redness had spread across her face and the girl who often came off as cold as ice now looked more like a girl her age should.

Meanwhile, Yaichi’s heart began to race as he watched her adoringly.

“Holy I don’t think I’ll be able to look her in the eyes when she wakes up”

He blushed hard enough to rival Ginko’s face.

Then, almost as if the little voice in his head managed to escape his lips, “Perfect This level of cute is just too perfect”

Ginko’s cheeks seemed to turn a deeper shade of red and Yaichi could swear that her grip was even tighter than before. Since she’s fast asleep, it had to be his imagination.

Nevertheless, he tightened his own grasp on his girlfriend’s hand and gazed at her face with affection.

“So cute Who knew that she was this perfect when she wasn’t on a rampage? I could stay like this for hours OUCH! Okay, she’s definitely squeezing harder!!”

Just then.



“Yo! Turn your head and cough!”

“Naughty boys and girls flirting in hospital beds must receive their shots.”

The door gets flung open in the blink of an eye to reveal two nurses standing in the doorway.

“R-Ryou?! M-Machi?! How did you know it was this hospital?! And, what’s with those nurse outfits?! Don’t tell me that’s how you snuck in here?!”

Yaichi released Ginko’s hand in a panic. Mr. Tsukimitsu and Ms. Oga were one thing, but being seen by these two would cause far more problems than it was worth. Yaichi’s decision was correct. Also, it turned out Ginko’s strong grip was his imagination because his hand slipped out instantaneously.

“Greetings to you, Ryou-san. The word *sneak* is a bit inappropriate.”

“That’s right, Kuzu. Look, there just happened to be a Women’s League fan club cosplay event ’round the corner. That’s why we’re dressed like this. It ain’t my fault they let us walk right past security.”

“That’s what *sneaking in* means!!”

The two Women’s Title Holders strode into the room carrying a fruit basket, a red and white celebratory card with the words *Congratulations on your promotion —All your friends* pinned to the front and a vase full of flowers without an ounce of consideration for its occupants. They pushed Yaichi out of the way and peered down at Ginko from her bedside.

“Eh? Ginko’s out cold, is she? Damn, this thing is heavy Ah, there we go.”

Saying that, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka set the fruit basket down.

Directly on top of Ginko’s chest.

“Hey! What you think you’re doing?! Big Sis’ll die like that!!”

Yaichi raced forward in a rage and lifted the fruit basket off her chest.

“My bad, my bad. Was lookin’ for a nice, flat surface and what do you know, there was one right here yah?”

“I get what you’re saying but quit joking around!”

Yaichi’s blood was still burning.

He screamed at them to protect the one he loved.

“Yes, Big Sis has a flat chest! Right now, it’s even flatter than usual because it’s wrapped in bandages to help support her broken ribs! It’s pretty much an airport runway and anything you put there will sit level. I realize that, but you know something?! She hit that flat chest so hard that she promoted to 4-*dan*!! What’s wrong with being flat, huh?! Who cares if things can sit on top of her easily?! That smooth chest proves just how hard Ginko’s been working!!”

“I wasn’t goin’ that far

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka was clearly taken aback. Indeed, she was implying nothing of the sort. Get it together, Yaichi. I’ll put your head on a pike ... is most likely what Ginko would have said if she had been awake.

“Ryuo-*san*, Ryuo-*san*.”

“Yes, Machi?”

“Just now, I believe I saw a disgruntled frown pass across Ginko’s visage Could she perhaps be awake?”

“No, no. She’s out like a light. They gave her some painkillers, so it’d take a lot to wake her up.”

Yaichi rejected the idea with solid logic.

And he was absolutely correct. Ginko’s medicine had made her drowsy, thus she was fast asleep. Besides, she was far too mature to be disgruntled by such insignificant developments. Compared to her experience in the 3-*dan* division, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui’s unannounced appearance didn’t even register.

“This room’s darn chilly, don’t you think?”

“It’s comfortable.”

Yaichi shot down another claim. Yes, he’s exactly right.

“Besides, what’s that ridiculously huge basket? Did you seriously bring a congratulatory gift on a hospital visit? And from what I can see, it’s pretty much just bananas and cheap fruit in here

Yaichi lifts up the basket that had been on Ginko’s chest only to discover it

was surprisingly light.

“This bouquet is extravagant, is it not? In fact, I arranged these flowers myself.”

“Cut the crap, Machi,” snarled Ryou as she angrily yanked the basket from Yaichi’s grasp.

“I’m the one who brought this *extravagant* fruit basket right here!! I even bought the basket over at Takano Fruits! But I did get the fruit from a small shop down the street from my place, though.”

“Takano? You mean that place by Shinjuku Station? You can eat there, too.”

“Sure can. You been there, Kuzu?”

“Back when I was 4-*dan*, Ayumu invited me there after I had a match here in Kanto.”

That was news to all present.

“But I thought it was weird for two guys to get fruit parfaits, so I turned him down.”

Upon hearing that, Machi succinctly commented, “It would not seem out of place to witness you doing so with Ayumu, Ryuo-san.”

Indeed. Those two were beyond suspicious.

Back when Ginko and Yaichi were young children, Ayumu Kannabe came to study Shogi overnight at the Kiyotaki household on many occasions. They were so comfortable around each other that it made Ginko jealous. They bathed together and even slept side-by-side in the lower bunk of the bunk bed that Ginko and Yaichi shared. Imagine Ginko’s shock when she saw them holding hands as they snored the night away The recent appearance of Ayumu’s younger sister Maria (currently in elementary school) provided Ginko with yet another source of headaches.

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka spoke up as if she suddenly remembered.

“Come to think of it, my older brother apprentice promised he’d treat me to Takano’s fruit buffet if he ever went pro.”

“Mr. Sakanashi said that? To you? He never joined me for dinner no matter

how many times I offered,” said Yaichi, sounding a little hurt.

Sumito Sakanashi was promoted to 4-*dan* at the same time as Ginko.

Normally only two players from the 3-*dan* division are promoted to the professional leagues after each six-month season. However, Mr. Sakanashi was granted a freelance position due to the bonus points he received from placing third two seasons in a row.

That being said, Mr. Sakanashi spent years toiling in the Sub League and generally kept to himself.

Perhaps making it to 4-*dan* right before the age restrictions forced him to retire inspired him to turn over a new leaf. It’s also possible that he always had a soft spot for his younger sister apprentice Ryou Tsukiyomizaka. Or maybe

It dawned on Yaichi and he yelled, “Agh! Don’t tell me the two of you are——?!”

“H-Hell no! Actually, get this!”

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka leaned right into him and started ranting.

“That old fart got real friendly with some college chick at the driving school / recommended for him! Apparently she started making cupcakes for him with *go get ’em*≡ written in frosting before his matches once he told her he was in the Sub League! Then he goes and wins 14 matches in a row after losing four right off the bat?! I think I deserve a *thank you*, yah?! DON’T I?!”

“Quite far off the mark,” Machi Kugui interjected.

But Ryou Tsukiyomizaka was far from finished. “Must be nice! Got into the pros, got himself a girl! Both at once! The guy’s a real pro at life, yah?!”

Yaichi clammed up.

“You know what, I bet the old fart made a deal with her like *be my girlfriend if I get into the pros*! He had hot and nasty things playin’ out in his head when he was in the 3-*dan* Exclusive Arena! That’s sacrilege, I tell you! SA-CRI-LEGE!!”

“..... Y-Yeah. He should’ve taken Shogi more seriously

“I feel sorry for the 3-*dans* who’ve committed their lives to Shogi. Damn, the Shogi gods are cruel. You think so too, right Kuzu? Yah?”

“..... Sure I do”

Despite being directly beneath the flow of frigid air from the air conditioning, Yaichi broke out in a cold sweat.

Ginko and Yaichi confirmed their feelings for each other while she was still in the 3-*dan* division However, they buried their feelings deep within their hearts with a sealing move, and their relationship remained platonic, unlike Mr. Sakanashi’s case.

Who has dirty ideas in their head? Want a pike through yours? was what Ginko would have countered with had she been awake to hear that.

“Well, as Ginko shows no signs of awakening from her slumber, it is about time we bid you adieu,” said Machi once she had placed the orchid bouquet on a shelf where it could never be missed by anyone. Ryou Tsukiyomizaka, who had started scrolling through her phone out of boredom, was quick to agree.

“Yah. We’ll be back.”

“Say what?! You will?!”

Yaichi takes a punch from Ryou Tsukiyomizaka for sounding annoyed that she wanted to return. She, however, started comparing her fruit basket to the one Mr. Tsukimitsu had brought.

“But, yah. Ginko’d never be able to eat all this fruit. I’d hate for it to rot away in here, so we’ll pitch in!”

“Huh? But that’s from the chairman——!”

“Hey, no need to thank us! I’ll take these melons, apples and peaches off your hands. All that sugar’ll put Ginko into diabetic shock before she can heal up.”

“Mangoes are in season, no?”

“Good point. The mangoes, too. Speaking of which, the mangoes that Mr. Kagamizu brought back from his ’rent’s place in Miyazaki that he passed out in the Player’s Room, now **those** were good I’ll miss that guy”

Hiuma Kagamizu.

The man who fought against the age limit all the way up to just before his 30th birthday had his last remaining door to the professional leagues closed off

when he lost to Ginko.

Theirs was a match that will live on in legends within the Sub League for decades to come. The quality of the match record had nothing to do with it. It was the immeasurable amount of emotion and willpower that went into each and every move that made their match so memorable.

Had Ginko's fingertips drifted just a few centimeters in any direction at the very end, it would be Mr. Kagamizu with 4-*dan* attached to his name right now rather than her

Reflecting fondly on the Kansai Sub League's *big brother*, Machi said in a mellow tone, "We must see to it he receives a fitting farewell party. Will you attend as well, O-Ryou?"

"With this fruit right here, yah. Let's head straight to Kansai an' tell him we swiped them from Ginko's personal stash. That'll make him feel a bit better, won't it?"

"Most certainly."

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui then disappeared with their arms full of the expensive fruit like marauders after a successful pillage.

They spent all of five minutes in the room.

Their visit had been as welcome as an out-of-season typhoon.

All present had endured the gale force winds and heavy downpour, but felt somewhat empty now that the storm had cleared.

"..... Why did they come here, anyway" Yaichi mumbled to himself in a daze.

The fact that they had interrupted his time alone with Ginko and taken their fruit had left him agitated to his very core, but it didn't end there.

The door opened just enough for Machi to pop her head inside.

"Machi? Did you forget something?"

"Ryuo-san. Please forgive O-Ryou for today."

"Huh?"

An unexpected request.

Machi quietly explained herself to clear up Yaichi's confusion.

"Her pain comes from her own failed attempt at the Sub League. The average Women's League player cannot fathom its depths. She resisted coming here. The only way for her to conceal that pain was to lash out, as you saw. Our costumes were to hide the heart she wore on her sleeve."

"Ahh I see. That makes sense"

After qualifying for the Women's League, Ryou Tsukiyomizaka tried her hand at the Sub League instead. Yaichi was able to connect the dots once Machi reminded him of that.

The young woman was unable to express her feelings or deal with her inner turmoil in a direct manner.

"She was a wreck immediately following her forced retirement. I believe that she had conflicted feelings about returning to the Women's League. Abandoning Shogi altogether was well within the realm of consideration, yet O-Ryou chose to carry on despite knowing she was bereft of the Shogi gods' favor"

""

"Ginko has seized victory. Though I believe the true battle still lies ahead. Though we have nary an opportunity to face her directly anymore, a battle shall ensue nonetheless. Said battle will only become more intense now that it cannot take place over a Shogi board," Machi stated with grace and then she waved one last time saying, "until we meet again in Kansai," before disappearing right back out the door for good.

"Phew Whatever that was, it sure wasn't a hospital visit"

Yaichi's assessment hit the nail right on the head. That wasn't a simple hospital visit.

It seemed closer to, yes, a declaration of war.

However, had Ginko been conscious, she would have been elated that the two of them had barged into her hospital room. Her face may not have shown it, but her heart would have definitely felt it.

“..... You made some great friends.”

Yaichi was the reason Ginko had met them in the first place. Ten years had already passed since that day.

Their relationship couldn't have gotten off to a rockier start.

However, Yaichi was glad to see that all of them could walk the same path despite every bump in the road that came along the way.

Then again.

“Ginko? Are you still sleeping?”

Yaichi shot his girlfriend an annoyed glance as she slept soundly on the bed.

Even with all the noise and ruckus in the room, Ginko's breathing still had the same rhythmic pattern as before.

Frustration was beginning to take its toll on Yaichi.

“Yeesh, you make me do all the hard stuff while you snooze all comfy in that bed. Don't think I haven't noticed that smile”

It was a figment of his imagination, but Yaichi was certain that grin had appeared across Ginko's lips.

We're together, right? It's your job to protect me, stupid Yaichi.

Of course, that too was just a figment of his imagination.

Though the bond they shared was so strong it could very well have been real.

“It's been like that forever. I always took the blame whenever Master or Keika got angry because you are just a little too good at adapting to the punches. Every bad thing you did turned into my fault. So——.”

Ginko was fast asleep.

Which gave Yaichi Kuzuryu an idea.

“..... It wouldn't kill you to show me some appreciation, would it?”

Yaichi reached out to touch her crystal clear, silky smooth skin.

Then, aligning his face with hers, he leaned lower and lower until his lips——.

“Ginko! Are you okay?!”

What greeted Keika Kiyotaki’s eyes as she burst into the hospital room was Ginko lying comfortably in the bed and Yaichi sitting quietly in the chair next to her.

Her shoulders nearly reached her ears with every breath, and still Yaichi shooshed Keika by putting a finger over his lips.

“..... (Shhh)”

“Ah! Sorry.”

Keika closed the door behind her without making a sound.

Had she been calmer, the strange air in the room would have caught her attention.

How forced Yaichi’s expression was, for instance.

Or that the room was bizarrely cold.

She also would have found the very intentional space between the two of them to be rather odd.

However, Keika was too sick with worry after her extremely rushed trip from Osaka to notice any of those things.

Careful not to let her footsteps be heard, Keika approached Ginko’s bedside.

“..... Is she sleeping?”

“Apparently, being awake hurts too much,” said Yaichi, gesturing at his own chest.

“It looks like she punched it with everything she had during her last match in the 3-*dan* division. The x-ray confirmed that a few of her ribs are cracked. One of her lungs looks damaged, too.”

“That’s horrible She was just playing Shogi, so how?”

“I understand what you’re saying. But, *dan*-ranking members of the Sub League play two matches, and things start getting hazy towards the end of the second one. Whether it’s smacking their cheeks way too hard or pinching their shins, everyone tends to hurt themselves without meaning to at one point or

another.”

Life and death.

That phrase was not the most relevant to professional matches.

Only in the Sub League did each match a player has ever played literally collide with the rest of their lives in such a decisive manner.

“Still, there’s nothing to worry about. Dr. Akashi came to check on her already, and he gave me his word that her ribs are the only problem.”

“..... Alright.”

Keika nodded.

Yaichi was still unaware of the true extent of Ginko’s heart condition. Keika had decided to take it upon herself to tell him one day if Dr. Akashi would not While that day may come, today wasn’t it.

“By the way, Yaichi. Don’t you think it’s a bit chilly in here?”

“Really? I think it’s comfortable.”

“Ohh? Well, what about Ginko’s mother? Is she still on her way?”

“I got a message from her a while ago saying that she was going to check into the hotel first. It sounds like she’s planning to stay for a long time.”

“How many years has it been since you saw her, Yaichi? Can you greet her properly?”

“O-Of course, I can I’ll be nervous, but I can do it.”

“If you say so. But you need to say it loud and clear, understood? Say *give me your daughter*.”

“HUUH?! Wh-Wh-Why in the world would I say something like that?!”

“*Giggle*. Did I jump the gun a little bit?”

Keika smiled teasingly and lifted up the fruit basket she was carrying.

“I brought some apples. It’s a bit early in the season, but they should be ripe.”

“Th-Thanks Actually, the chairman and Ms. Oga brought us one of the deluxe assortments, but it got raided by Ryou and Machi a little bit ago.”

“Those two were here?”

“Before I could tell them what hospital, they just kinda showed up
Running away from Machi is impossible.”

“You’re probably right But she wasn’t after Ginko by the sound of it”

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Not a word,” Keika denied with a sly grin.

Then she reset her frame of mind.

“More importantly! It’s a zoo outside the hospital, did you know that? TV cameras, reporters How did they find out where Ginko is?”

“People in the Shogi world like to talk.”

Yaichi shrugged.

“Sure, we keep our distance from outsiders, but secrets don’t last long on the inside. And no one has a filter when it comes to newspaper or magazine writers they know personally. Those writers work for publishing companies, and their information spreads from there”

“So word gets out quickly.”

“Besides, most people put in charge of overseeing Shogi articles for big newspapers and magazines are typically former Shogi club members at famous universities, right? Highly decorated amateur players have connections with pros that go way back, so it’s like talking with old friends to them. Not that I’d know about that because I never went to high school, but still.”

Yaichi’s words were a bit sharper than normal.

Since Ginko had always been the boisterous one, Yaichi appeared placid by comparison However he sounded surprisingly belligerent to Keika at the moment.

“You seem a bit agitated.”

“No kidding.”

“Is it because Ginko is that important to you?”

“Of course she is. She’s my older sister apprentice.”

“Uh-huuuh? Mnn-hmmm?”

Keika’s subliminal *why can’t you say she’s your girlfriend right now, hm?* message came across as clear as day.

However Ginko and Yaichi had already discussed this.

Even a practical member of the family like Keika No, because Keika was so close to them, they wanted to deliver the news together at the proper time and place. If possible, they wanted their Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki, to be present as well.

Which was why Yaichi stood firm against Keika’s interrogation and utterly refused to let the news slip.

Yaichi jutted his chin toward the window.

“Those reporters outside would follow even if we went back to Osaka, right? It’s better for her to stay here and heal up for right now.”

“Is that what Dr. Akashi said?”

“Yeah. Since she’s here, it’d be great to run some other tests, too. You know, one of those thorough checkups?”

“Uh-huuuh”

“Plus, journalists are going to want to interview her and who knows how many TV offers are coming. It’d be a lot easier on Ginko to just stay in Tokyo for a long time and get them all out of the way at once so that she doesn’t have to waste energy going back and forth.”

“Are you sure she should be doing that? I brought the tablet with the software you asked for so she can do research, but I don’t think the hospital is the best place for it.”

“It’ll work.”

“Huh? But——!”

Her skills are going to suffer! However, Yaichi already had a counterargument prepared for just that and cut her off in midsentence.

“Doing research after an intense match like that? It’s pointless because nothing will stick. Worse, it burns you out. Rest is what she needs right now. A

few casual matches over the Internet is enough. Having that tablet around for a change of pace will be perfect.”

“But, we still don’t know when her first match will be, right? She has to stay sharp and make sure she doesn’t get rusty. No wait, she’s got to get even better so she can hold her own against professionals——.”

“New pros don’t face the top players from the get-go. She’ll be matched up against geezers well past their prime at first, so *4-dans* actually have the advantage. Ginko will win as long as she sticks to what she’s good at. They’re all weaker than *3-dans* anyway.”

Yaichi broached a typically taboo topic without so much as a second thought.

Sub League members who failed to make it into the professional leagues were in fact stronger than elderly players on the tail end of their careers. That was the undeniable truth.

Yaichi then explained another reason why now was not the time to fret.

“This is how it went for me too, but guys who get promoted to *4-dan* in the early part of the year don’t make their debut until November or December around the time the Ryou League Preliminaries get started, yeah? Of course, the chairman didn’t tell me that, but hey.”

“So there’s some breathing room then?”

“Yeah. Especially now that she doesn’t have to worry about defending the Women’s Throne title anymore.”

“Does Ginko really have to give up her titles?”

Ginko claimed her first title in the spring of her sixth year in elementary school. She was 11 at the time.

Having held it for nearly 5 years, she qualified for Eternal status.

The Queen and Women’s Throne Titles would be connected with Ginko forever Practically every Women’s League player, not just Keika, felt that way.

“Irony, isn’t it? Achieving her dream meant that she had to give up the titles she fought so hard to defend while never losing once”

“Maybe it’s better this way. Having that much baggage took a lot out of Ginko for years,” said Yaichi right on cue.

Baggage. Indeed, those two Women’s Titles had been a great deal of weight on Ginko’s shoulders. While never *in the way*, they were not something to be taken lightly.

And they would carry a different meaning moving forward.

“If she kept the titles, that means she’d keep playing against Women’s League players, right? Naniwa’s Snow White became a pro without a scratch on her record She’s become an absolute, a god almost. I don’t think that’s what Ginko really wanted anyway.”

Keika responded to Yaichi’s claim with disbelief.

“..... Are you saying that if she lost to a Women’s League player, she would take more heat now because she’s a professional? That her reputation would go down? That’s terrible”

“Naniwa’s Snow White has pretty much become a brand name on par with the Eternal Septuple, and both are only going to get more valuable from here on out. I doubt that the association or sponsors would want to put that at risk.”

“B-But! Ginko is so much better than the rest of us in the Women’s League. As long as she plays normally, there’s no way she would lose, would she?”

“No, she wouldn’t. *Right now.*”

Yaichi agreed ... *with one condition.*

“But, that might not be true next year.”

“.....!!”

“The thing about competitors is that chemistry also comes into play. Even if one has a higher skill level, they won’t play their best if they’ve got some bad memories against a particular opponent. Heck, I’d struggle against some Women’s League players and Sub League members who’ve given me fits in the past if I got behind in waiting time.”

“Well That may be true, but”

Superiority and inferiority are determined whenever two players clash.

However, the inferior player still has a decent chance to win any given match. Keika had experienced both sides of that coin.

Ginko Sora was strong. Overwhelmingly so.

That strength had become traumatic for members of the Women's League.

Ryou Tsukiyomizaka and Machi Kugui got a taste of it when they lost to her very early on. That loss has grown into an internalized fear that prevented them from performing at their best against her to this day.

That was the trick behind the curtain of her legendary flawless record.

More so than her Shogi strength, she instilled fear in all her opponents.

Ginko was well aware of this and had been for years. She had come to loath Naniwa's Snow White and the reputation that nickname had garnered, but she herself did not care about remaining undefeated against Women's League players. In fact, if a loss against one of them would have afforded her even just one more victory star in the Sub League, she would have gladly made that exchange.

However, new players who didn't fear the name Naniwa's Snow White, let alone Ginko Sora, were now part of the Shogi world. A younger generation of players had arrived who possessed more talent than she had.

What's more, the one reason said players—.

"Well, pretty much anyone who makes it through the Sub League in high school has enough talent to make a run at a title. I mean, even pros are taking her seriously. Of course, the grade schooler who promoted along with her is getting a bit more of the attention, but still."

"Th-That's true. Sota has been all over the news."

Sota Kunugi, a sixth-grade elementary school student.

In terms of just Shogi skill and talent, the first-ever elementary school-aged professional Shogi player was leagues above Ginko Sora. From the perspective of other professionals, he was most likely the greater threat.

"But I still think Naniwa's Snow White is getting plenty of airtime. Part of it's probably because she hasn't had the press conference yet though"

“Maybe her getting hospitalized has unexpectedly raised everyone’s expectations? Hiding something only makes people want to know what it is even more.”

“Still, I’m worried about the future Ginko might roll with it like she always does, but

“She’ll be fine. Ginko made it to the pros on her own power, and she’s physically stronger now than she used to be. She’s not that frail girl from way back when. And——.”

“And?”

“My immaturity is part of the reason she went through the ringer. That ends now. I’ll be protecting her from here on out. I’m the younger brother apprentice, but I have more experience in the pros.”

I’ll protect her.

How reassuring would that show of determination have been had Ginko been awake to hear it? No doubt she would have broken down in tears of joy Just, she’s asleep right now.

Yaichi cast his loving gaze back on Ginko.

Keika, on the other hand, had to stifle a laugh.

“Well, this is new. Speaking of, when did you start calling her *Ginko*?”

“Huuuh?! I-I used to do it all the time!!”

“Oooh? But you’ve only called her *Big Sis* for years now. I was just wondering why the sudden change.”

“Nothing’s changed!” yelled Yaichi, his face bright red. “S-So how’s Ai doing?”

He abruptly changed the subject.

With the Crown Title Match to take part in, Yaichi had entrusted his apprentice to the Kiyotaki household.

Acutely aware of how awkwardly their conversation had turned, Keika decided to stay on this new discourse.

“She’s fine. I was with her until she left the house this morning, actually. She looked happy heading out the door.”

“I see. I’m glad, but sorry for always asking you to look after her

“Don’t worry about that. What you should be worried about is that her best friend Mio is gone now. It can’t be easy for her I hope she’s feeling okay when she gets back from the airport. Dad is home, but that just makes me worry even more.”

“Mio’s the reason Ai was able to fit in so quickly. Her time with Shogi and school would’ve gone a lot differently without Mio around

Ai Hinatsuru was not the only beneficiary.

While Yaichi was a given, Mio’s naturally energetic personality had positively impacted a great number of people. Even Ginko had to acknowledge that fact.

Loneliness and regret naturally came from being unable to say a final farewell in person.

However, the knowledge that they would see Mio again someday managed to overpower those emotions. So long as she continued to play Shogi, there was no doubt that their paths would cross once again.

And everyone who had met the girl with a smile as bright as the sun knew that she would never abandon Shogi.

So there were no goodbyes. No special words were necessary. Everyone would simply bolster their skills for the next time they met.

Yaichi looked out the window at the blue sky and said, “Do you think she’s in the air now?”

“If they made it to the airport in time, yes. I had to send the girls there on their own

Keika seemed concerned.

Most likely she was feeling guilty about not seeing them off as they had originally planned. Granted, the express train went directly to the airport, and the staff would surely be able to assist the girls once they arrived. There was no need to hold their hands. In fact, Ginko and Yaichi were around their age when

they rampaged their way through Shogi classrooms around the country.

Then suddenly.

“Oh, my phone is buzzing Maybe a message from Ai?”

Yaichi took his phone out of his pocket to check.

However someone else’s name appeared on the screen.

“Actually, it’s from Ayumu. He and Ms. Shakando would like to come for a hospital visit.”

“Shakando-sensei, too?! Well, she has looked out for Ginko quite a lot over the years. That’s nice of her to want to stop by.”

“It’s nice that she has enough common sense to ask first, unlike some people. But when it comes to clothes”

“..... Those two in this tiny room might be a bit much.”

Women’s Legend Rina Shakando and her apprentice Ayumu were known for their distinct fashion sense: frilly dresses, capes and whatnot. Therefore, their very presence in this rather small private hospital room would be loud, to say the least.

“Also, the association sent out a report.”

“About Ginko I presume?”

“Yeah. Probably.”

Sub League players were required to place their cellular phones in a locker before their matches.

Although the phones were returned once matches had concluded, Ginko’s phone was still powered off. There had been more important things to attend to than turning it back on.

Thus, people wishing to contact Ginko were forced to go through someone who had a high probability of being with her. In other words, they had to contact Yaichi Kuzuryu.

“You think Ginko sees me as her personal secretary at this point?”

“The youngest Ryuo ever and Crown Challenger who’s on top of the Shogi

world? Naaah.”

“I’m just a side note compared to the first female pro in history.”

“Give yourself more credit. Dad, Ai and I all watched that Crown Title match! I don’t think there are five players on earth who could’ve beaten *that* Okito-*sensei* as convincingly as you did.”

“It was all luck. The sealing move timing worked out, so I had all night to think.”

“Oh, the sealing move Dad and I both thought you were taking a big chance by forcing that attack. I still can’t believe it actually worked”

“That was luck, too.”

To anyone else’s ears, it would sound as if Yaichi was just being modest. However, that was more or less how he truly felt.

In the Shogi world, truly strong players were prudent all the time.

One could not afford to let *pride* or *overconfidence* weaken one’s fighting spirit. Yaichi knew this impenetrable mindset was directly connected with constructing equally robust formations on the board.

“Mr. Okito is strong. He never questions himself, not once. Everything he does has a clear purpose, and it all leads to one thing. He’ll come up with adjustments for the second match.”

“Because he believes in everything the software says?”

“That’s part of it. But it’s easier to keep blindly pushing forward when you believe in something.”

“Ah——.”

Just like Ai.

Keika managed to swallow her words just in time. This was not the place to utter them As they would be quite a shock to those listening.

Instead Keika altered her statement to this.

“But questioning yourself is also what makes you stronger. Don’t you think?”

“Yeah.”

Yaichi nodded.

“It might mean taking the long way, but I believe that makes you stronger in the end.”

“.....”

One look at Yaichi’s face, and Keika was at a loss for words.

The boy she knew so well clearly wasn’t there anymore.

Yaichi in the not-too-distant past would never have been able to say that out loud. Surely his past losses and failures would have prevented that.

Now, however, he could turn those losses and failures into strength.

This Yaichi Kuzuryu wasn’t the kind little boy Keika had watched grow up.

Demon King of the West.

A young man who could stand up to the inhumanly strong sequences produced by computers and make them his own to become something stronger than a computer itself. He was arguably the strongest player currently active in professional Shogi.

The reason no one had stayed in the room more than a few minutes wasn’t out of consideration for Ginko.

They simply couldn’t stand it.

The intimidating majesty of said Demon King made them unconsciously head for the door. As if running away.

The stronger their senses, the more impactful his aura. It practically *made them suffer*. The currently A-ranked Seiichi Tsukimitsu most likely took the full brunt of its power.

Even Ginko would have been overwhelmed had she not been sleeping

Ginko was fast asleep.

The Demon King gazed lovingly upon Snow White before he took out his phone and stood up.

“Keika. Would you watch Ginko for a minute? I have to make a call.”

“S- sure. Take your time.”

“I’ll be back real quick, I promise.”

So saying, Yaichi left the room with only his phone in his hand.

Keika and Ginko were left alone in the hospital room.

“..... Now then.”

Once she was sure that Yaichi’s footsteps had faded and he was out of earshot, Keika turned her attention to the girl lying in bed and started talking.

“I know you’re awake, Ginko.”

“.....”

Ginko didn’t respond.

Of course, she didn’t. Her eyelids didn’t even flutter. How could Ginko hear her voice at all when she was fast asleep?

Keika, however, didn’t let that stop her.

“You’ve always been good at pretending to sleep so that you could keep an eye on Yaichi, haven’t you? I know that you have a condition, but I also know that you’re very good at faking sick. Like all those times you stayed home from school so you could practice Shogi, for example? Did you think nobody caught on? It’ll take more than wrinkling up your eyebrows in pain to pull a fast one on me.”

Ginko didn’t answer. She didn’t talk back. Even if she wanted to argue, she couldn’t because she was asleep.

Though it was true that Ginko was rather skilled at pretending to be asleep. For a girl whose earliest memories were dominated by being confined to a hospital bed, it was the first technique she ever learned.

Except this was different. She truly was asleep.

“Fine, whatever. You staying like that works better, anyway.”

..... Works better?

“I have to get back to Osaka today. I need to check up on Ai and my father, as well as get the rest of your stuff so I can bring it back up here. So I’ll be back before you know it, but I’m heading home today.”

Expelling all those words in one breath, Keika leaned in close to Ginko’s peacefully sleeping face.

“You realize what I’m saying, right?”

No. Not while I’m sleeping I can’t.

Keika pokes the still-unconscious Ginko’s cheek and declares, “I’ll help you out this one time so *make the move and checkmate!* That’s all.”

Then a few moments after that——.

The door opens and Yaichi steps inside.

“I’m back.”

“That was fast.”

“Did someone drop by?”

“Huh? Nobody was here. Why?”

“I could’ve sworn I heard you talking to someone

“I was venting to Ginko. You saw just how hard she’s been trying, haven’t you? Dad and I watched and held our breath the whole time, worried sick There’s so much I want to say to her I couldn’t wait until she wakes up to say it.”

“Ah I get that. Sorry, I should’ve called you and Master first thing——.”

“No, Yaichi. That’s perfectly fine,” Keika continues in a rushed voice. “Here’s the thing, though. I know I just got here, but I need to get back to Osaka.”

“Huuuh?! Already?”

“Yes, already. But I need Ginko to wake up before I leave because I need to ask her lots of questions. There are things that only young women will understand, things they don’t want boys to overhear, you know?”

“Yeah That makes sense. Just like how there are some topics that only Ranging Rook players will actually understand. Like Double Ranging Rook

strategies, for example.”

“Would you get your mind off Shogi for a minute? Look, I’m in a rush. That’s why I need your help, Yaichi.”

““My help?””

Keika responds to the stunned look in Yaichi’s eyes like this.

“Yaichi. Do you know how Snow White was awakened after eating the poison apple?”

Still confused, he answers.

“She got kissed by a prince, right?”

“You do know, then. If you would.”

“Come again?”

“It’s up to you to wake up Snow White with a kiss. A big wet one, right on the lips.”

“PWFFF?! A k-k-k-kiss?!”

“Not a King, and certainly not a cat. The princess has been waiting all this time for a kiss.”

No, I’m not. Why would I be? I couldn’t care less!

..... Yaichi’s the one who tried to kiss me. I didn’t wake up so things didn’t get awkward, that’s all. This was what Ginko would have said were she not asleep. But since she was, there was no response at all.

“You must be getting hungry by now? I’ll go cut up one of these apples for you.”

Keika plucked one from the fruit basket and disappeared out the door.

But, she poked her head back inside just as quickly and said, “Ah! Almost forgot. I’d better tell you this first.”

“T- tell me what?”

“I’ll come back in about 15 minutes! 15, got that?!”

Then, Keika closed the door again and was gone for real this time.

“.....”

As the echoes of her louder-than-necessary footsteps disappeared down the corridor, Yaichi gulped down the saliva in his mouth.

Ginko was asleep. Sleeping like a rock.

It should be completely silent, but an unmistakable thumping now filled the room. It was Yaichi’s heart, no doubt, yet the other occupant could hear it loud and clear.

Had the air conditioner broken? Stifflingly hot.

“.....”

Awkwardness ensued.

A slightly sweet scent wafted through the air, almost like apples.

The hand that had stopped agonizingly short last time reached out once again and finally contacted her face.

Fingertips caressed her skin. They tingled like static electricity.

Hot. *Ba-dump, ba-dump*.

Then, his face bright red, Yaichi asked, “G-Ginko? You’re asleep, right?”

I’ve been asleep the whole time, stupid Yaichi. Can’t you tell by looking? Stupid. Stupid idiot. Stupidest idiot the world has ever Mnnn
≡

Then, after exactly 15 minutes had passed, Keika returned to the hospital room to find Ginko wide awake.

“Good morning, Ginko.”

“..... Morning.”

The young girl was still drowsy, her face an apple-like red. Yaichi, on the other hand, hid his face by looking out the window Keika didn’t touch the subject.

“Te-he-he! Looks like something else has been touched, right?”

Quiet down.



AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

The girls who got pushed off to the side during the Sub League arc finally going to get some time in the spotlight! Yay!

Ai and the girls have had problems to work out just like Ginko, Hiuma and the other 3-*dans*. I wanted to make sure that the energy of cheerfulness of the Grade School Practice Group came shining through.

I'm off to prepare for the final story arc. Perhaps you can pick up on some foreshadowing Hopefully your interest will be perked!

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

I lost all my Ginko Sora cover data in a computer crash, so drawing her from square one again was a challenge

The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 13

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 13

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by SB Creative Corp.



SB Creative

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